

Brush with sensuality offered at Olin

By ANN WEINSTEIN
Art Columnist

"Paintings from New York Galleries," the group show at Olin Gallery, Roanoke College, is another of those good news-bad news shows.

The good news is that painting, despite premature reports of its demise, is alive and well. The show is part of a new wave of social commentary and sensual art partially induced by the disengagement and visual boredom of the movements preceding it.

It is art that has come out of the closet of intellectual stringency into a broader arena of life. These modest works, if in fact they do reflect contemporary thought, may make a significant change in cultural attitudes.

The works themselves are mostly good news, and a few bad. While taste and even style, elite qualities of "high" art currently in disrepute, are expendable, vitality is not.

Also good news, the show brings the current scene to the Roanoke area. A matter of samplings rather than consistency, it whets the appetite for more.

The bad news, at least in certain cases, is that there is no more. Conclusions have to be drawn from limited input.

The works as a group have a strong sense of reference to the past: some to Abstract Expressionism, 30 years and as many light years ago in the history of modern art, and others to ancient cultures. But all of them have had their encounters with art history and modernism.

While many of them, intentionally crude or raw, lack the polish favored by the public, they either incorporate subject matter in their imagery, or assume the materiality of an object. Generally they are small-scaled, anti-heroic, intimate, accessible and appealing. Although there are plenty of exceptions, the prevailing mood of the show is good humored.

Louise Fisher's paintings infuse softened, centered geometric forms with personal intimations. What she seems to take most seriously is the affirmation of painting, long denied by the anti-paint, anti-texture premise of stained canvas and minimalism. With oil and wax as thick as icing, an open-mouthed, three-dimensional rectangle floating in indeterminate space is called "Diva."

Jack Berthot draws or scratches organic marks into the center of an arena of gray impasto. These personal hiero-

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glyphs convey a different message. As tantalizing as a crucial but indecipherable message, these seemingly slight works have a persistent after-image.

A fool-the-eye drawing by Paul Sarkisian initiates a dialogue between art history and modernism, illusion and the inclusion of collage material into paintings. Its concept, surface composition and subject matter, as convincingly "real" as collage, are 20th century concerns.

Martin Johnson, a graduate of Virginia Tech, parodies movements as diverse as Abstract Expressionism and conceptual art. Using the word, the scrawl, scribble, gesture and symbol, his schematic diagrams look as if they had been drawn by a child; primitive impulse confuting imposed ideas.

Decorative art is related to the techniques, materials and egalitarian values of feminist art. The brash color and high, vertical energy of Kim MacConnel's fabric wall-hanging stimulate the eye and mind. Unframed, its exotic arabesques and Oriental fans are no more precious and no less a part of the environment than the TV, iron and sewing machine painted on one of the panels.

Pastel under glass, "Double Fan" by Andy Tavareu is also decorative but much more polished. It is not too far-fetched to say its colors and design suggest a modern version of some ancient Indian sun god. The semi-circular shape of the open fan is a sun symbol, and the design can be read as a mask. But the flat space of the construction, its sense of geometry in slatted shapes and notched edges, and its clean but exposed mechanism transform historical references into a 20th century object.

Katherine Porter's reticent paintings whisper metaphysical intimacies. She organizes a lot of experience—order, obsession and openness—into small places. Terrence La Noue introduces isolated motifs of cultural antiquities. Chinese lattice-work and a Mexican head, into ethereal washes of color and gorgeous effects of metallic pigment. But the painting remains undecided between its spiritual and decorative intentions.

In Michael Tetherow's work, thick, light-absorbing paint coagulates into an amorphous head with literally pierced eyes. A specter of primordial being or an echo of a hollow man, they arouse recognition and denial.

Philip Guston, a figurative painter before gaining fame as an Abstract Expressionist, has returned to representation. Self-confrontation and alienation, rendered in a deft, decisive flow of ink and a flat comic-strip technique, are amplified by the uninflected tone. Equally disturbing, Juan Gonzales' delicately pencilled, artificially staged drawing plays startling tricks with mind and eye.

An androgynous, kimono-clad figure, with back to the viewer, appears to be a woman with her wrists bound, or a man with his finger bandaged. A posh, decadent, period room, seemingly a haven without ceiling or walls, becomes part of a desolate wasteland fading into a vaporous void.

In "High Wire" by Nicholas Africano, a grim, funny man, crudely shaped and painted in relief, balances awkwardly in a world limited to the length of a rope. Although his predicament arouses sympathy, he suffers from a crowded installation. His world would shrink proportionately to more wall space in which to play this drama. His next step would be more crucial, his balance more precarious, and his options more limited in relation to the greater opportunity for disaster.

Jared Bark mounts 26 strips of photo-booth portraits, four rows deep, into a conceptual statement and a minimalist grid. But ordinary people are the subject matter; and his picture can be seen entirely in a glance only at a distance at which the format and faces dissolve into a field of overall pattern. These may be Bark's points of entry into this exhibit.

Susan Shatter's Peruvian landscape will appeal to those who like traditional painting. But while the subject matter looks "real" enough, nothing is quite as it seems. Flattened space suggests claustrophobia and mounting steps obsessiveness. A brilliant but cold light, spilling through abandoned architectural forms, isolates geometric shapes and voids like vacant eyes.

The exhibit, scheduled through Jan. 9, was curated by Ray Kass, assistant professor of art, and circulated by Virginia Tech.

(Olin Hall Gallery reopens Thursday. Hours are 1-4 p.m. Monday-Friday and 2-4 p.m. Sunday.)