

# Living Arts

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## Art Review

### In Brockton, a slice of Boston's art scene

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GLOBE STAFF

**B**ROCKTON - Every three years, the Fuller Museum of Art takes the pulse of the Boston art scene with a big group show. The arteries are throbbing in the high 90s this time, I'd say: The patient is doing OK but is not in world-class shape. The prognosis is fair. Boston art, by the look of this 43-person exhibition, is plodding along pretty well. It is thoughtful, engaged, caught up in the larger world. It is well represented in the city's better galleries, as evidenced by the artists' affiliations. It is fairly conservative, with Janet Monafó's skillful pastel still lifes at the most traditional end of the spectrum. Surrounded by work that addresses issues of the environment and the way artists relate to the natural world, Monafó's views of squashes and teapots seem complacent and reactionary.

This is the Fuller's sixth triennial, and it differs from the others in important re-

spects. In the late 20th century you can't "take the pulse" without video, installation and mixed-media art, yet all the other triennials have been confined to painting and sculpture. This one isn't, and the result is a more accurate picture of what's going on. That picture is wildly varied. It's hardly surprising, though, that there isn't any longer a signature style that says "Boston," as there was, say, in turn-of-the-century painting in this city: Regionalism in art is all but dead.

What is surprising is that there aren't many surprises. More than 1,000 artists applied for the honor of inclusion in the triennial, according to a museum spokeswoman. Curator Peter Baldaia chose 43. But even though artists who had been in any of the last three triennials weren't eligible for this one, almost all of those in the 1990 exhibition are the usual group show suspects, rounded up once again. There's nothing *wrong* with this, of course. Baldaia just gives us his honest view, which seems

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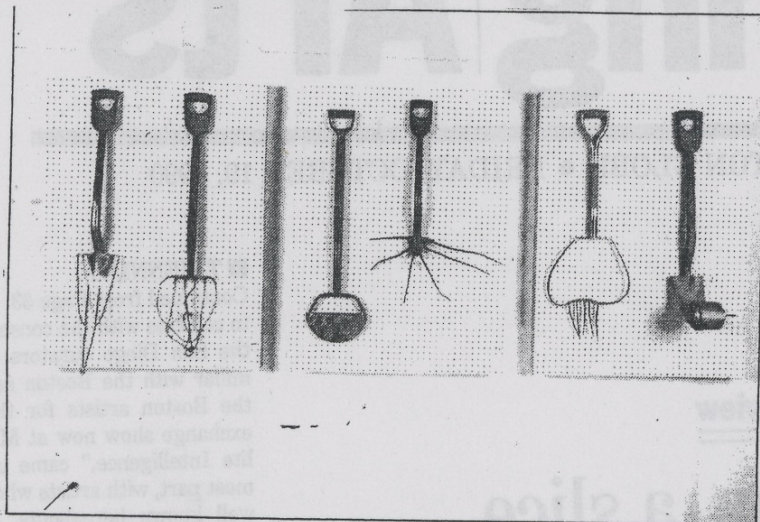
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to coincide with the consensus. Even the San Diego curators who, unfamiliar with the Boston scene, chose the Boston artists for the two-city exchange show now at MIT, "Satellite Intelligence," came up, for the most part, with artists whose work is well known hereabouts. There are two artists - Gerry Bergstein and Cameron Shaw - who are in both shows. (I admire both of them tremendously, but my feeling about their inclusion here and nearly everywhere else is summed up by a comment a critic once made about the sculptor Henry Moore: that some days it seemed as if the only way to avoid running into another Moore was to go home and hide under the bed.)

The numbers of artists who apply to the Brockton triennial indicate its importance to the Boston scene. Would that the show could happen within the more prestigious walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art or the Museum of Fine Arts, two institutions that have historically been lukewarm toward the local. With its dual emphasis on the extremely obscure and the extremely trendy, the ICA generally limits its attention to Boston artists to its "Boston: Now" series. The MFA did a better job with Boston artists while Kathy Halbreich was contemporary curator there, but now she's left and her yet-to-be-named replacement will have to be persuasive indeed to compete successfully for time, space and first-class attention for Boston artists.

In coming up with the roster for his triennial, Baldaia has chosen artists who think solemn thoughts, artists who deal in subject matter. There's a lot of Save the Earth sentiment here. Very few of these artists work abstractly. Natalie Alper, whose huge, swooping, joyful "Currents, Climates, Changing Times" is

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**Marilu Swett's untitled work, in wood and steel.**

one of the happiest paintings in the show, is an exception. There are also very few artists who deal in humor. The exception here is Karl Baden, whose collages of other people's photos are a scream: See the Gilbey's Gin ad with lurching ladies, their turf inexplicably invaded by a male frontal nude by George Platt Lynes.

The show is hung intelligently, to connect like-minded work. The opening gallery, for instance, positively throbs with organic imagery, starting with A. L. Drezner's romantic-conceptual installation, "Field: No. 408." Dried long-stemmed roses are impaled on metal clamps, row after regimented row of them. Ordering nature has caused it to die. Roses are also the subject of Roberta Paul's "Eh Rose" series. Each is made of four blocks of wood, intricately but crudely carved, a single letter of the word "rose" on each, fighting for space with various flora and fauna. Paul is one of the artists in the show whose work has developed immensely over the past couple of years. Mela Lyman, Nan Tull, Brenda Atwood Pinardi and Wendy Seller are others.

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The organic imagery in Daniel Wills' "Reduced Circumstances" is abstracted into a long wood cylinder with bulbous ends. The wood is bare, and looks fleshy. Spiked through it are nasty bits of twisted wire, like frazzled nerve endings or electric shocks made visible. Abstracted, too, are Catherine McCarthy's ravishingly lovely oil and wax paintings, which just barely suggest bleached bones. Next to them are Christopher Barnes' color photos of Ellis Island interiors — pre-restoration — showing deserted, decrepit spaces. (Barnes' work is reminiscent of choreographer Meredith Monk's haunting Ellis Island performance piece.)

The two most ambitious works in the triennial refer to contemporary politics, and both are well-meaning failures. Robin Shores' "Spend a Day Where You Can Just Stare at the Walls" is a large, crumbling plaster wall inscribed by a post-Ellis Island generation of immigrants and dedicated to the Palestinians who were killed recently at Temple Mount. In Michael Roy Layne's outdoor installation, "A Caged Heaven," a fuchsia

BOSTON 1990: THE SIXTH TRIENNIAL EXHIBITION

At: Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, through Jan. 13

safe haven and prison, and the ramps, ropes and poles around it represent the fact that you can't leave this isolated spot. Overexplaining the piece with text, Layne actually likens the tepee to Kuwait.

Many of these artists seem to be trying to nail down a purpose — in art, and maybe in life. As with a lot of theme exhibitions nowadays, what comes across most strongly is the search for a way out of the hermetic insularity of mere self-expression. The artist who succeeds most fully has the smallest, quietest pieces in the show, but do they ever pack a punch. Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz's little paint on brick on mirror constructions are about Armageddon, California-style. Bungalows are coolly, and clearly painted on broken bricks that might have come from the buildings themselves — before they were hit by the Big One. In one case, the bricks are on a mirrored shelf, and the reflections are taunting and unsettling. In "Beaver Pond," broken trees on broken bricks and painted pond on mirror make for an eerie symmetry. Spatz-Rabinowitz is never afraid of tackling the grandest themes, and her whisper is more startling than other artists' screams.

Here's the whole list of the artists in the triennial: Terry Albright, Natalie Alper, John Christian Anderson, Karl Baden, Christopher Barnes, Domingo Barreres, Andres and Geoffrey Benson, Gerry Bergstein, Deborah Cornell, Leah De Prizio, Damien DiBona, A. L. Drezner, Frank Egloff, Jane Ehrlich, Sarah Grimm, Lorie Hammerness, Timothy Harney, David Judelson, Nick Lawrence, Michael Roy Layne, Mela Lyman, Catherine McCarthy, Joyce McDaniel, Emmett McDermott, Steve Mitchell, Janet Monafa, Roberta Paul, Brenda Atwood Pinardi, Shelley Reed, Ron Rudnicki, Wendy Seller, Cameron Shaw, Robin Shores, Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz, Marilu Swett, Alexa Thayer, Arnold Trachtman, Nan Tull, Suzanne Vincent, Daniel Wills, Cathy Wysocki