

Brenson, Michael. "Quiet Art Need Not Be Boring or Wimpish," *The New York Times*, 26 November 1989

# The New York Times

ART VIEW; Quiet Art Need Not Be Boring or Wimpish

By Michael Brenson

November 26, 1989

The spotlight of the art world is rarely drawn to art that is quiet and discreet. New York is so noisy, so swollen with information, so restless with issues that seem to demand immediate attention, that reticent, self-contained art is easily overlooked or dismissed. There is a general assumption - particularly in New York - that an art of introspection and tact has little or no ability to deal with those pressing issues with which the art world is always concerned.

This assumption is not without truth. Art that is the product of a sensibility that is reserved and modest is not likely to take anyone's breath away or expose raw nerves. It will not make anyone feel that the fundamental contradictions of the moment are being uncovered and considered. It does not have the ability to claim the attention of the art world. In short, it will never replace the kind of bustling, immediate art that is at home in the lights and action of a media age.

What is not true is the assumption that art that is modest and discreet automatically lacks nerve and is intrinsically boring and wimpish. An art of reserve may not be able to release and channel the anger and frustration that are always near the surface of the art world, but there is nothing wrong with swimming in waters that are not stirred by bitterness and rage. It may not hit anyone on the head, but it can have its own kind of punch. And it is by no means certain that quiet art is any less willing to struggle against limits than art that wears defiance on its sleeve.

There are several sculpture shows in New York now that suggest what a reserved, essentially private artistic sensibility can do. The work in these shows deals with many issues, from the fragility and force of nature, to the nature of perception, to the dialogue within the self between assertiveness and self-effacement, silence and sound.

Whenever you find art that unfolds slowly and patiently, you will find an art without cynicism that is as willing to listen as to speak. In their belief in patience and silence, the sculptors in these shows implicitly argue not only for provoking the public but also for allowing it to be. The quietest art often has an attentiveness and a precision that are themselves a moral fact. And no one should underestimate what deliberate, muted, well-crafted art is capable of. It is impossible to set limits on what any artist with a distinct and poetic sensibility can achieve. In the end, convulsive and contained, extroverted and introverted art complement each other as fundamentally as the pre-World War I Picasso and Braque.

Indeed it is clear from these shows that any dichotomy between these two ways of feeling is false. In any enduring brash art, there remains a secret. In any influential secretive art, there is a public statement.

The sculptors are David Rabinowitch (at the Barbara Flynn Gallery, through Feb. 28), Maren Hassinger (at the SoHo 20 Gallery, through Dec. 9), Abraham David Christian (at the Scott Hanson Gallery, through Wednesday), Joel Fisher (at the Diane Brown Gallery, through Saturday) and Houston Conwill (at the Museum of Modern Art, through Jan. 9).

Their ages range from 37 (Christian) to 46 (Rabinowitch). Conwill is from Louisville, Hassinger from Los Angeles, Rabinowitch from Toronto and Fisher from Ohio. Christian, whose name is partly assumed, is a West German citizen who studied with Joseph Beuys and prefers to keep his birthplace to himself. All five sculptors have studios in New York. Rabinowitch also has a studio in the Netherlands. Christian spends the better part of each year in West Germany and Japan.

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All have been influenced by Minimalism, which helps explain their involvement with closed geometrical shapes. Most of their work is, on one level, abstract. When there are suggestions of the human figure, as in the sculptures by Christian, they are controlled by references to architecture and furniture.

Each sculptor is involved with symmetry. Each maintains a dynamic dialogue between containment and expression - a dialogue that may in some way be the art. Each show is in some way a meditation on how much to reveal and how much to conceal. In each of these sculptors, there is a struggle between a feeling of humility and restraint and a need to make a statement that is bold and clear.

Christian's sculptures are the most delicately balanced. Many of his works are white. While they look like plaster, they are in fact made of paper. A number of them look like disks aligned one on top of another like a pile of oversized toadstools or miniature flying saucers. No matter how similar they may seem, the disks are usually different in size, which helps create an unusual sense of sculptural movement. As you move around these sculptures, they seem to rotate with you. You can never get too close to them. While they seem to call for attention, they also seem to be turning away.

Christian's sculptures are about movement on a number of levels. Walking through this show offers something of a journey through different cultures. Some sculptures may suggest the elegance of a Japanese courtesan, others the weight of a Greek caryatid, or the chunky blockiness of models for Mexican Mezcala architecture or liturgical vessels from Christian or Jewish ceremony.

There is a lot of Brancusi in Christian's smooth, but never entirely organic, shapes, and a lot of Giacometti in his insistence on distance. Christian is trying to construct objects that will be responsive and tactful enough to be safe and effective anywhere.

In his four new marble sculptures carved in Portugal, Fisher is working with symmetry for the first time. Like several of Christian's sculptures, they are upright and circular, they recall Brancusi, and they suggest architecture, particularly fountains and columns. But there is almost no sense of movement in them, and, unusually for Fisher, almost no human or animal associations.

Their strength lies in their ability to make a familiar post-modern point about context and diversity in an unfamiliar way. Three of the four sculptures seem to be made of different kinds of stone. In fact, each was carved from a single block of marble. Since Michelangelo, there has been a fascination with the concept of a single essence buried within a marble block that the sculptor sets out to release. Fisher's blocks of marble have multiple identities that may be as dignified as a Buddha or as mundane as a shaving brush. What those identities are depends entirely upon the ways the stone is approached and treated.

Rabinowitch's show is just one work. "Open Wood Construction (Poplar)" is 10 feet tall, 8 feet wide and 12 feet deep. It is the largest realization of a sculptural idea that the artist first defined in the mid-1960's. The sculpture is cool and schematic - designed by him but carved by others - and very much about perceptual rather than bodily experience.

Rabinowitch has the kind of doctrinaire involvement with the idea of democracy that was characteristic of American art of the 60's. Although each work in the series to which this "Open Wood Construction" belongs is part of the same sculptural family, each is different in size and in the wood used. No sense of interior life is implied; nothing in the work is hidden.

The whole is made up of many points of view. Each aspect of the work - inside and outside, open and closed, sharp and smooth, ascension and gravity - is exposed. Each point of view seems equally important. Although the sculpture appears just to be there in a way that does not impose itself, it has something of the quality of a manifesto. It is almost a call to equality, investigation and wholeness. Hassinger's sculptures are far more private. She builds her solitary trees and her landscape tableaux with cables; sometimes she uses cement. Her sculptures seem delicate, even fragile. When installed in the landscape, they are so much a part of it that they can barely be noticed. Hassinger's sculpture seems to hide from the spotlight rather than seek it out.

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But like the work of Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois, who clearly influenced her, the two sculptures at SoHo 20 are not only vulnerable but also tough and suggestive. "Bush" is an upright cable construction that suggests a column of fire, or a huddled crowd, or a figure with a hundred hands. It is at once endangered and bristling.

The other sculpture, the 3-foot-tall "Field," is one of Hassinger's best works. The base is a square consisting of 25 cement squares. Sprouting from it are cable trees of different sizes. Some are upright; the tallest seem to be bending under a ferocious wind. Because each individual cable undulates, there is a sense of an entire field exposed to what could be an atomic wind.

It is a very personal work: the trees almost seem like a four-member nuclear family. Yet the issues they raise are also general. The use of industrial materials to suggest a fragile nature and the implication that industry is part of nature, is pointed and poignant. Of the five shows, Conwill's "Cakewalk Manifesto, a Cultural Libation," which is part of the "Projects" series of contemporary art at the Museum of Modern Art, is the most conceptual and ritualistic. Like Rabinowitch's sculpture, it is almost insistently democratic, and it is more explicitly inclusive. It involves words - passages by well-known and less known black men and women, as well as a book by the artist's sister, Estella Marie Conwill Majozo, to be read throughout the show.

The passages are sandblasted in white letters on a large upright floor-to-ceiling window covered by a circle or wheel that is at the same time a dance floor, a cosmogram and a diagram of the American South. The book is on a table set in front of the window like an altar. On the table is a bowl with stones from Atlanta, Memphis and Louisville and a shell from New Orleans; there is also a carafe of water from Tusculumbia, Ala., the center point between these Southern cities, all of which have an important place in black history.

Conwill spent three years in a monastery in Indiana, and his work is filled with religious references. In the accompanying brochure, Lynn Zelevansky, a curatorial assistant at the museum, mentions that there are visual links with a "Kongo cosmogram" and with the rose window of Chartres Cathedral. At night the white writing becomes illuminated, almost phosphorescent. The circular movement and list of cities suggest a pilgrimage and a new kind of globe, one that maps African-American history.

Although its public and private, gentle and prodding, transparent and hermetic sides resist as much as reinforce one other, "Cakewalk Manifesto" is a work of impressive sensibility and ambition. It is about celebration, memory and family. It is about bringing international culture into the context of black experience rather than having black experience incorporated into international culture. With its passages by Frederick Douglass, Jayne Cortez and others about the necessity of struggle and protest, it is quietly but firmly provocative.

In the way Conwill's installation brings to mind Marcel Duchamp's mischievous and metaphysical "Large Glass," and in the way his involvement with transparency and spiral movement brings to mind Robert Smithson, this work is a reminder that some of the most influential 20th-century art has had a private, self-contained, secretive edge.