

At Bennington College: Moments of Recognition

BENNINGTON — In her brief catalogue for the exhibit "Matter and Spirit," at the Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, curator Emily Sorkin writes: "In this decade, with both subject and method of execution determined by the artist, the dangers of indulgent overabundance and visual excess are prevalent."

One need only to have seen this year's Whitney Biennial to agree with Sorkin: Today's esthetic credo is "More is More." But this prevalence of "indulgent overabundance and visual excess" has led, for the most part, to gooey confections, thick surfaces and shallow meanings.

This is, according to historian Christopher Lasch, the "culture of narcissism," and the esthetic inflation makes sense; those who make it in this system are the ones who make the biggest spectacle out of as little of nothing as possible. And in the business of making spectacles (art, religion, business and politics) it's dog eat dog (yes of course, it always has been, but to degrees).

"Matter and Spirit" was composed of a body of works by a list of eight artists which includes Willem DeKooning and Mark Rothko. According to Sorkin, "The selection of art here concerns the moments of recognition when the artist combines idea, intuition and material ... (in an attempt) to achieve an impossibility: the union of matter and

spirit."

What Scorbin arranged was not only a program of paintings but a mingling of "presences."

In spite of the fact that the small DeKooning from 1937 reflects the painter's concerns with the representationally derived forms of cubism (particularly Picasso) a very RESOLVED form of pictorial invention appears strangely, as Scorbin points out, "unspecific." The picture is not held together by its allusions to still life or human forms, or by cubist gravity but by a very strange sense of contradiction and open-endedness. In the Rothko, which is also quite early, forms are pushed to their grey limits and what is left is the presence of a "dissolved" work in which, as in the DeKooning, the viewer senses the painter's struggle to resist the recognizable, representational origins of painterly invention. Through their labors along these lines in later works, both artists have achieved magnificence.

A large work by Ronald Bladen pushes the tension even beyond the grey consequences of Rothko's and DeKooning's resistance. Bladen's choices are limited to two colors, or perhaps values, of earthy siennas and umbers, one raw, the other a fleshier tint; and a simple arrangement of compressed forms. In this work spacial relationships and densities interact in what Scorbin calls "pendular" resolutions; in other words the viewer

tends to apprehend the unity of this work in a kind of flip-flop manner, between the small, dense clots of light and the vast areas of muddy umber.

Where the DeKooning and Rothko move toward a more tenuous sense of resolve, and the work by Bladen achieves its resound through scale and the presence conjured up by carefully invented spacial tensions, Bill Jensen distills mythological vapors from organic geometry. In his painting entitled "Fragile," a pink biomorphic volume floats in a field of speckled color surrounded by seed-coating-like encasements. The image seems to be a depiction of a parthenogenesis of some sort, where particles of color are in the midst of forming some sort of new life.

The show also includes four small works on rice paper by Agnes Martin, a sculpture by Jim Clark executed in stainless steel and a large, densely painted street scene by Larry Deyab.

The show is also a good opportunity for viewers to acquaint themselves with the works of the late Jan Muller. Influenced by Munch, Ensor, and even by Klee, Muller developed an impressive body of work that now, nearly thirty years after his death, is attracting a good deal of attention. Much of the present enthusiasm has to do with the new interest in "figurative" and "expressionistic" work. His figurative works depict such odd scenes as, in

Scorbin's description: "Prostrate naked women with approaching equestrians," which express "a recurrent theme, human debasement," and more specifically, we might add, the debasement of humans who are women.

Muller's figurative work deals with an odd assortment of spooks and their shadows, sexuality (specifically the type which characterized Neanderthal men and women, though softened in Muller's characterization through wispy and precious representation) and the guilt which is associated with it (for having not gotten rid of many of those sexist, Neanderthal feelings).

But Muller is also an abstractionist. One very small, early work, a mosaic of color built around a grid — a work that looks very much like a Klee — seems to emit the "unspecific" light of spirit, that "elusive quality" which Scorbin hoped to demonstrate in this show.

The catalogue aptly quotes the painter and critic Fairfield Porter: "Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy, and in doing so releases you from chasing after the distant and ideal. When this occurs, the effect is exalting."

This show represented an attempt to reassign to art a more compelling meaning, a teleological meaning which has been obscured by the present hoopla for spectacles.