

A BOUNTIFUL SEASON IN OUTDOOR SCULPTURE REVEALS GLIMMERS OF A NEW SENSIBILITY

By MICHAEL BRENSON
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AT a moment of so much promise for sculpture, the first question to be asked about the outdoor sculpture season is whether the vitality is evident here, too. The answer is an emphatic yes.

Indeed, this is the best season for outdoor sculpture in some time. There is more of it, there is more of it with a clear sense of purpose, and together the works now occupying the fields, streets and walls of New York City reflect many of the issues with which sculptors are now concerned.

In addition, in the large exhibition at the South Beach Psychiatric Center on Staten Island, there are signs of a new generation and a new sensibility - one that brings to outdoor sculpture a wide-open, Post-Modern approach to sources and materials.

There are a number of possible reasons for the present abundance. Although there appear to be a growing number of sculptors and a growing interest in sculpture, there are still only a handful of galleries willing to show large-scale work, even by artists with a reputation. As a result, many young sculptors now look immediately outdoors for outlets that might enable their work to be seen.

Partly because of the bottom-line mentality that still decides what many galleries do and do not show, other, more-established artists prefer to keep at least one foot outside the gallery system. Some of the most thoughtful outdoor sculpture is by artists with a clear distaste for commercialism and a clear social commitment. John Ahearn, David Finn and Christy Rupp are part of a growing list of sculptors who exhibit in galleries but whose hearts are in the streets.

Another factor is the impact of the Community Arts Development Program of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs. The seven-year-old program is directed by Marie Artesi, who looks for sites and then works with community organizations and the artists they commission. Not all the works supported by the Community Arts Development Program are successful, and it is possible that the stringent requirements will not allow for a work of major ambition. But the restrictions also create a bond between art and place that can infuse a work with a special strength.

Most of the noteworthy outdoor work this season falls into two main categories. One is the outdoor sculpture exhibition, which often includes work that would be as effective in galleries. The other consists of individual works, usually commissioned, and as dependent upon the site as a Renaissance sculpture depends upon its niche. There are also sculptures like Louise Bourgeois's "Eyes," which were not created for but effectively placed in a particular location. Following is a guide to some of the outdoor exhibitions and to some individual works, now on view around the city. Outdoor Exhibitions

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Aaron Judge Lifts Yankees Past Astros With His Bat and His Glove
- 

3. Forget Marx and Mao. Chinese City Honors Once-Banned Confucian.
- 

4. WORDPLAY
Nanki-Poo's Pursuer
5. WORD OF THE DAY
Word + Quiz: tantrum
- 

6. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR
The Booker Prize's Bad History
- 

7. ROUNDUP
Champions League: Chelsea Rallies for Draw; Messi Leads Barcelona
- 

8. At the Palais de Tokyo, Camille Henrot Finds Wonder in the Everyday
- 

9. WEEKLY NEWS QUIZ
Weekly News Quiz: Mogadishu Bombing, Insurance Subsidies, Harvey Weinstein
- 

10. New York City's Libraries Will Forgive All Children's Fines

South Beach III (South Beach Psychiatric Center, 777 Seaview Avenue, Staten Island): The best outdoor sculpture exhibition this season is spread out across the large field and high grass of one of the loveliest sites in the city. The show includes 11 artists - Peter W. Boynton, Joanne Brockley, Petah Coyne, Steven Currie, Peter Dudek, Elizabeth Egbert, Sean Landers, Curtis Mitchell, Toshio Sasaki, Jack Risley and Bill Albertini, who assembled the show for the Organization of Independent Artists. Everyone was asked to contribute two works, one made specially for the site.

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Part of what makes the show noteworthy is an irreverence and free-wheeling approach to materials that is relatively new to outdoor sculpture. For example, in his "Cyclops," which looks like a medieval shield held up by a pole, Mitchell uses newspaper printing plates, a grill, a speaker and fake fur - stuffed into a hole inside the shield so that the fur looks like a hibernating gopher. Risley's large, translucent sculpture made of fiberglass and plywood suggests a figure resting on its arms, or a boat. In the bottom frame there is an opening the shape of female genitals through which we are offered a panoramic view.

What is also intriguing is the degree of experimentation and the range of artistic sources. In the work of the younger artists, there is a total rejection of Minimalism and an investigation of earlier 20th-century developments. Boynton's sculpture is like a 15-foot-tall, free-standing Cubist construction. Brockley's half-erected or half-destroyed tenement suggests a free-standing Cubist construction with a very un-Cubist involvement with social content and dream. Peter Dudek's painted wood sculptures seem like enlarged and three-dimensional De Stijl paintings.

The exhibition includes three of the strange creaturely concoctions of Coyne. Assembled with earth, roots, tar and wax, they look like huge roots that suddenly erupted from the earth and began to roam free. They are playful in the way they relate to one another and in the way some upright roots resemble hair standing on end. But one of the creatures wades through space with the fierce determination of the "Nike of Samothrace," and all three seem to have the magical powers of gremlins and witches.

"South Beach III" was financed in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Staten Island Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. (Through Oct. 31.) Sculpture in Place (Borough of Manhattan Community College, 199 Chambers Street): This exhibition -also sponsored by the Organization of Independent Artists - has about as much vitality as the one last year at the same site. That is to say, not much. There is imaginative work here, but too little responsiveness to the site. The artists are Wenda Habenicht, David Henderson, Susan Leopold, David Schafer, Jane Schneider, Ritsuko Taho, Meg Webster and Cynthia Willett. The Leopold and Webster sculptures, as well as photographs by Karen Gaines and Kenneth Golden, are indoors.

There are, nevertheless, works that are worth a visit. In Schneider's wood sculpture, three organic, creaturely forms sniffing the ground and bearing other forms on their backs like creatures of myth suggest an attempt to combine both bawdy humor and the kind of emotional gravity identified with great sculpture of the past. Habenicht continues to work with wooden forms that seem to be trotted out of horse shows, but her five wooden platforms now contain raw as well as highly finished forms, and her platforms seem to shift back and forth like planes in a Cubist painting. Henderson's "Into the Maelstrom," one of many outdoor sculptures in recent years that is inspired by the sea, suggests both a boat transporting a maelstrom and an oversized, self-important sea captain aboard an undersized boat of discovery. (Through July 31.) Artist's Furniture (City Hall Park, Broadway and Park Row): An unusually rich outdoor sculpture season would not be complete without work reflecting the current interest in the relationship between sculpture and furniture. This uneven show - sponsored by the Public Art Fund - includes one work each by Donna Dennis, Jackie Ferrara, Rodney Alan Greenblat and Stomu Miyazaki.

Greenblat's "High Chair" - part chair, part castle, with a big smiling face and crown of houses - is nowhere near as successful as the artist's smaller works. The painting seems

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hasty and the sculpture, despite being 15 1/2 feet tall, has no sense of scale. Without his customary precision and control, Greenblat's childlike humor and fantasy seem fatuous.

The most successful works are by Ferrara and Dennis. Ferrara's "Love Seat" has humor, it provides a place to sit facing the warm, endearing edifice of City Hall - "City Hall was badly in need of a love seat," Ferrara has said - and it gains scale in the way its cubic and ziggurat shapes echo the architecture around it.

Dennis's "Tourist Cabin" may be intended as a model for the kind of refuge city officials dream of. The miniature bungalow nestled in the trees is complete with screen doors, windows, a folding mattress and suitcase. The work seems airy and open. But Dennis's works are never what they seem. With no handles on the doors and therefore no way to get in or out, and with the stunted size, the bungalow is claustrophobic and even sinister. (Through Nov. 30.) Fordham University Plaza (Robert Moses Plaza, Fordham University, 62d Street and Ninth Avenue): With its large, flat terrace, surrounded by tall buildings, the Fordham University Plaza is an intimidating sculptural site. The works in this show - organized by Vivienne Thaul Wechter with Roy Moyer of Artists Representing Environmental Art - tend to be architectural and of modest size. As a result, they get lost in the expanse. There is one work each by Jeffrey Brosh, Penny Kaplan, Phyllis Mark, Angela Veneto, Jay Coogan, Arman, Joe Moss, Raquel Rabinovich and Ilan Averbuch.

Arman's "Being Beateous" is more successful than his "Rostropovich's Tower," an endless column of violins in front of Lincoln Center. "Being Beateous" consists of three bronze bass fiddles cut up like stringed instruments in a Cubist painting and leaning against one another in a way that suggests both the playing of and the experience of listening to schlock music.

The most provocative work in the show is Averbuch's "Event No. 1." The upright, canoelike forms, the four standing wood figures with big Dumbo ears, and the tarred brick roofs lying almost flat on the ground, suggest a vocabulary of tribal forms. The sculpture climbs toward the sky, glances around the plaza, and directs our imagination into the ground. What is engaging is the determined, if somewhat labored attempt to introduce to this urban setting a sense of ritual and wonder. (Through Sept. 8.) Site-Specific Works John Ahearn (Intervale Avenue and Fox Street; 170th Street and Walton Avenue, the South Bronx): John Ahearn lives in the South Bronx, where he creates reliefs for the walls of neighborhoods with which he is familiar. Assisted by the sculptor Rigoberto Torres, he makes casts from people around him, then turns them into fiberglass and paints them.

Ahearn is clearly inspired by the men, women and children he encounters every day. He does not try to turn the common man and woman into heroes. He believes they are heroic. And he is determined to communicate and reinforce their capacity for goodness.

To this sympathy with his subject matter, Ahearn brings a relief sculptor's sensitivity to shape, composition and walls. He will see a face and be drawn to its capacity for sculptural expression and movement. He will see a blank wall and fall in love with it as a fresco painter might have become obsessed with a patch of wall in a church.

Ahearn cuts, crops, paints and composes his figures. His understanding of composition enables him to suspend and fix the figures in place, making them seem both an immediate part of the neighborhood and somehow beyond it. It is also with composition that he struggles against the constant danger of sentimentality.

The earliest of Ahearn's four works in the South Bronx is the 1982 "We Are Family," which was commissioned by the Department of Cultural Affairs. It consists of nine figures, young and old, compositionally roped together so that they hang crescent-shaped on the wall like a clothesline. "We Are Family" marked the first time Ahearn worked in fiberglass, it was his first attempt at casting the full figure, and it was his first permanent outdoor work.

Ahearn's most successful work may be his most recent one. It is a sculpture-mural, 25 feet wide and 40 feet high. It faces Community Elementary School 64, just off 170th Street and Walton Avenue, from which the casts of the children were taken. The reds and yellows

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dominate the work are the predominant neighborhood colors. The way everyone is locked into the clockwise compositional movement gives the friendly and attentive gestures of the grownups and children a sense of inevitability.

Hera (Glenwood Houses, 1704 Ralph Avenue, between Glenwood and Farragut Roads, Brooklyn): Hera's "Vaulted Arbor" consists of strips of galvanized steel forming an arch 22 1/2 feet high and 43 feet wide. The steel brings to mind the ribs of a Romanesque and a Gothic vault. Since there is nothing between the ribs, however, this architectural sculpture has the feeling of a religious edifice waiting to be built. Hera clearly wanted this work to protect and inspire.

"Vaulted Arbor" was produced by the Brooklyn Botanic Garden with a grant from the Department of Cultural Affairs Community Arts Development Program. The Botanic Garden provided different kinds of plants, which have been attached to the steel so that they climb like ivy. If they ever cover the steel completely, the work will resemble a natural temple.

Elizabeth Egbert (Cpl. Lawrence Thompson Park, at the intersection of Broadway and Wayne Streets, West Brighton, S.I.): Elizabeth Egbert is a Staten Island-based sculptor whose public work has been involved with children. Her "Broadway Starship," made for a Staten Island park in which there are almost no recreational facilities, is one of the most resolved public sculptures in the city. It knows exactly what it is, where it is, and to whom it is speaking.

The material is oak. The main shapes are two equilateral triangles. In the middle is a three-tier crossing. The ground level is for babies. The middle level is for children and adolescents. The 10-foot-tall archway on top serves as a lookout tower for parents. If the work allows for continuous movement, it also encourages patience and observation.

As always with Egbert, the work was assembled from numerous parts. Once again her wood suggests both fire and water. If the succession of upright poles across the middle resemble flames, they also bring to mind a steamship wheel. And all the passageways suggest footbridges. This is a work for children and play in which adults and the imagination are welcome.

"Broadway Starship" won a competition for the site that was organized by the Cityarts Workshop. The sculpture received support from the Department of Cultural Affairs Community Arts Development Program.

David Finn (Entrance to the Manhattan Bridge, Canal Street and the Bowery): "Theater of Indifference" consists of 10 of David Finn's friendly, derelict figures, assembled from the debris of New York City streets. One figure sits on the top of the gateway to the Manhattan Bridge. Two others are on their hands and knees on the ledge just below. There are seven more on three other levels, including two on the ground.

On the Manhattan Bridge, Finn has created something of an allegory of Manhattan. The first figure we see, the one on top, is cheery and welcoming. As we move down, however, the raggedy people begin to clash with the ebullient spirit of the architecture. On the ground the tone changes radically. Now we find decomposing, headless figures rotting in an urban wasteland. We begin with a triumphant image of New York and end up with a triumph of indifference. (Through Sept. 8.) Russell Sharon (11th Street and Avenue A): In an empty yard lined with rubble, Russell Sharon has installed six red, blue and yellow birds and birdmen from his ever-expanding sculptural menagerie. Some are 20 feet long or 20 feet tall. All are precariously assembled from strips of wood. Without preciosity, Sharon has managed to mold creatures that stalk through this barren plot of East Village landscape with warmth and humor. (Through Sept. 8.) Christy Rupp (23d Street and Fifth Avenue): Christy Rupp's "Social Progress," sponsored by the Public Art Fund, is an allegorical sculpture directly in front of the Flatiron Building. It consists of a 17-foot-long ear of corn that looks like a bomb waiting to explode. Feeding on it are two huge black ants. In front of the corn, dragging it along inch by inch, is a six-foot-long snail with st tentacles and a goofy expression. Social progress sure is slow.

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If all this sounds self-important, it isn't. There is humor in Rupp's work. There is also an intriguing struggle between an attraction to social symbols drawn from the natural world and an identification with the natural world so strong that it compels us to see those symbols as living things. (Through Nov. 30.) Louise Bourgeois (Doris Freedman Plaza, 60th Street and Fifth Avenue): Louise Bourgeois's "Eyes" is one of the more successful installations in the Doris Freedman Plaza. The white marble sculpture consists basically of a cubic block with two spherical eyes perched on top of it, guarding the entrance to Central Park. The work has an ancient and futuristic aspect to it. If it suggests one or two frontal pharaonic figures, it is also like alien beings staring into space; it even suggests a mock version of Henry Moore's "King and Queen." Like many of Bourgeois's works, "Eyes" is both childlike and provocative, with a sculptural tautness that the Public Art Fund, which sponsored the work, recognized was perfect for the site. (Through Oct. 31.)

photos of outdoor sculptures around the city (NYT/Arlene Gottfried and Bob Glass)

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