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Review/Art; Four New Sculptors

By MICHAEL BRENSON
Published: January 6, 1989

Curtis Mitchell is one of many artists living in a raw warehouse area in Brooklyn, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge. One of his three untitled works in the "Emerging Sculptors" show at the Sculpture Center was inspired by a visit to Manhattan's glitzy Trump Tower. With its rectangular trunk shape, its marble facing and a carpet placed over it as carefully as a shroud, the sculpture suggests a fancy portable altar. But the carpet is pseudo-Oriental, the marble is veneer, and the black coating on top of the rug is prime New York City soot.

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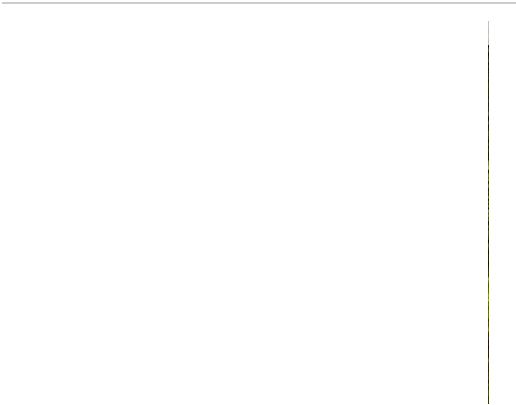
In his other two sculptures, Mr. Mitchell also takes pure geometric shapes prominent in Minimalism and Formalism and dips them in the gritty underside of New York life. An austere table covered with what looks like black earth is in fact a butcher's block caked with dried blood. The wall sculpture suggesting a red and green Formalist painting is a red beach towel almost entirely coated with Montauk Point sand. If Mr. Mitchell, with his black humor, his love of materials and his hatred of pretension, ever gains full confidence in himself, look out.

He is one of four artists in a show that has a quiet edge. Because almost all the shapes are simple and closed, the show can seem calm, even sleepy, but there is something rumbling within, and it has to do with an awareness of the disorder behind whatever remains of the orderly facade of American life. Although all the sculptures are modest and the show never really takes off, these are, after all, emerging artists. This is the most coherent emerging-sculptors show the Sculpture Center has done.

Lucy Puls constructs sculptures suggestive of plants and sea. "Seer" is like a shell, "Lift" like an ark. Both are built with strips of Fiberglas arranged in layers. Metal sheets appear here and there, and they seem to protect parts of the sculptures like bandages. The screws holding the layers together jump about like rays of silver light. However organic and transparent these constructions may appear, they are penetrated by a sense of disjunctiveness and irrationality that distinguishes them sharply from the utopian Constructivist sculpture they bring to mind. Like Ellen Driscoll, Ms. Puls makes jarring, upbeat work that is systematic and arbitrary at the same time.

Susana Jaime-Mena uses shifts in material and tone to compose conundrums. For example, she will use lead for just one ridge of an otherwise all-wooden relief. Or she will lean two squares identical in size against a wall; one is covered with seamless lead while the other is built with interlocking blocks of concrete. The effectiveness of the work depends upon its ability to jam thought: to disrupt the machinery of logic just enough to make us change gear.

More than any of the other sculptors, David Kezur works with found objects. His open gray box filled with red magicians' balls is in fact a shoe stand. A relief that looks like two rubber legs with stumpy wooden feet was made by fitting an inner tube around two blocks



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of wood and then hanging the tube over a nail. In each of Mr. Kezur's works, something supportive or protective loses its protective and supportive function. What results is a sense of exposure, violence and, perhaps most of all, amputation.

"Emerging Sculptors" is on view at the Sculpture Center, 167 East 69th Street, through tomorrow. Irving Petlin Kent Gallery 41 East 57th Street Through Jan. 28

The Kent Gallery is a more appropriate setting for the work of Irving Petlin than the Marlborough Gallery, with which he used to be affiliated. It is smaller and more congenial to intimate work. Because there is no pressure to fill a large gallery, there may now be less danger of this fine artist making work that is anecdotal or overblown.

This mini-retrospective of pastels is a well-selected and compelling show. It begins in Arles in 1961, when Mr. Petlin was 26 years old. In these images of a family troupe gathered in front of quilted fields under a hot sky, the blurred forms and bittersweet color characteristic of his work are already present. Throughout Mr. Petlin's work, it is never quite clear what we are looking at or where we are - or what is reality, art or dream. There is invariably a sense of performance and of homelessness, and of an eternal wandering.

In the "Hundred Fighting Men" series from 1962, there are hints of the Italian Renaissance in the array of male nudes and of Goya in the way violent men huddle together in superstition and fear. The nudes look like masked thugs, but they are also filled with panic. They lash out, and they seem to be desperately trying to escape over a wall into the flat and quiet land. There is a reminder here of the mythological struggles waged in the contemporaneous paintings of another Chicago-born artist, Leon Golub.

"La Rue des Juifs," from 1983, is an example of the hybridization that can result in the work of someone who seems to feel rooted in almost any kind of art. It is a scene of four figures in a street lined with houses that are warmly lighted but sealed like fortresses. The walking figure suggests Balthus. Two older figures standing in the distance are reminiscent of Daumier. The life of the architecture, with a building at the left standing watch like a soldier, comes out of German Expressionism. In this magical world, unfolding beyond the railing of a balcony that is in fact the back of the green chair in the artist's studio, various aspects of modern art and Jewish history seem to be collapsed, or folded together.

There are other pastels in this show that have a similar enchantment, but take a look also at the two large paintings in the back gallery. Both landscapes are dominated by bright yellows, whites and pinks. Both were inspired by visits to Israel and Egypt last summer. Both are Cezannesque, with transparent fields in the foreground and mountains in the distance. In Mr. Petlin's world, the promised land is visible, yet we can only reach it in art, or in the imagination, or in sleep. Jaume Plensa Deborah Sharpe Gallery 152 Wooster Street Through Jan. 21

Jaume Plensa is a 33-year-old Catalan artist whose work has strong affinities with his eminent Catalan predecessor Joan Miro as well as with Catalan art of the Middle Ages. Although Mr. Plensa's sculptures and mixed-media works on paper may be familiar in their surfaces and shapes, however, something distinct is throbbing about within his prehistoric organic shapes. There is almost an obsession with sexuality, reproduction, multiplication and proliferation.

In "Cutaina I and II" - both made of iron - podlike, germinative forms stand as erect as fertility goddesses. In each case, however, the hair all the way down the back is independent of the body, and it does not so much hang down as climb over and all but strangle the head like some voracious larva. In "Galileo," the sense both of protection and captivity is apparent in the way two rusted conical forms stand guard over a third, which is secure and imprisoned within a small round fortress.

The sense of something regenerating itself out of control is strongest in "Llit." This is an aluminum sculpture with 10 rows of 20 spheres - each sphere numbered - lying on the floor like eggs or grenades. In the middle of the rectangle is a tower of 18 rings like life preservers or tires, or like the growth rings on trees. Throughout this show, there is a need

to touch the deepest sources of creation and growth. At the same time, there is also a feeling - which may have something to do with living in the age of population explosion and AIDS - that getting too close to those sources is dangerous and forbidden.

Photo of a rubber and wooden sculpture

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