

In a Pictorial Framework

Phyllis Bramson

Finley Fryer

Gundersen Clark

Story Mann

David Saunders

The New Museum

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Story Mann

June 30 - July 21, 1979

Finley Fryer
David Saunders

July 28 - August 18, 1979

Phyllis Bramson
Gundersen Clark

August 25 - September 15, 1979

The New Museum
65 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10003

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Acknowledgments

The nature and range of this exhibition evolved over approximately a year's time, as we continually clarified and redefined the fascinating realm of pictorialism being explored primarily by younger artists as the 1970s come to a close. We are indebted to Marcia Tucker, Director of The New Museum, for the support and advice she gave us through her active participation in the evolution of this project.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following people: Tim Yohn, who continues to provide invaluable editorial advice; Jak Katalan and Alyssia Lazin for graciously designing and producing the catalog under severe time deadlines; Maureen Stewart, Administrative Coordinator of the Museum, for attending to essential administrative matters; Robert Price, our preparator, for installing the exhibition; Emory Craig and Ellen Vanden Broeck, for assisting with so many details during the installation; and Linda Marchisotta and Monique Knowlton of Monique Knowlton Gallery, for providing documentation about Phyllis Bramson and her work.

We are also indebted to Dieter Kearse, The New Museum's Director of Planning and Development, for contributing the essay on Story Mann, and to Francois Rambach for curatorial assistance with the installation. We sincerely appreciate the support of Artist's Space, John Essen, Edward Gibbons, Donna Preiss, and Peter Pretz, which enabled Story Mann to fully realize his installation.

Above all, we are most indebted to the artists for actively and generously helping us overcome the complexities of this kind of exhibition.

Susan Logan
Allan Schwartzman
Kathleen Thomas

Preface

In a Pictorial Framework is actually five separate exhibitions (or, more accurately, installations) taking place consecutively throughout the summer months at The New Museum. As a whole, they constitute the tenth exhibition in our present quarters, and an attempt once again to provide an outlet for new, unknown, and often difficult work which would not otherwise be made available to the public in New York.

The pieces shown here are complex, impermanent, and unwieldy installations, and with one exception were designed and executed especially for the exhibition, and - in the case of Gundersen Clark, the work is accompanied by performances scheduled at regular intervals throughout the period of the installation.

Of the five artists, all but David Saunders live and work outside New York - in San Francisco, Austin, and Chicago - and initial acquaintance with their work was made by staff travel to those parts of the country. None of the pieces has been seen here before, and the majority of the artists are showing their work here in New York for the first time.

We have elected to organize the individual installations under one title and catalog because they all extend an esthetic vocabulary beyond the traditional formats; the pieces are neither painting nor sculpture, although they utilize the elements of both. They participate to some extent in attitudes indigenous to theater, stage design, and performance. In some pieces, certain literary and narrative traditions are also brought to bear. In all cases, the participation of the viewer in an immediate and often disconcerting way is an essential aspect of the experience of the work.

I would like once again to thank all those who have made the exhibition possible, both the Curatorial Associates who organized it and the many volunteers and interns who helped to bring the project to fruition. We are especially grateful to funding from Exxon Corporation, the Jerome Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, whose support of new work by emerging artists has been of inestimable help to us.

Marcia Tucker

Introduction

Examining another of the countless modes in which contemporary art is operating, **In a Pictorial Framework** consists of five installation works by six artists. The six artists have in common an impetus: to work in a comprehensive framework so as to intensify esthetic experience and to reach a broader audience. There are other similarities in the works exhibited: a largeness of conception and execution involving nearly excessive combinations of forms and images; a metaphoric, narrative, or dramatic schema, expressing psychological as well as esthetic considerations; the use of strong pictorial imagery; and a concern for the physical orientation of the audience. However, differences in approach, intent, and effect separate these works on many levels.

As a product of and commentary on the society from which it comes, these works reflect and respond to an intensity of activity and experience and an all-encompassing way of coping with contemporary existence. There is an attempt to integrate and orchestrate the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of both the art and the audience. The work evolves not from any single visual or performing art discipline but from the junctures of painting, sculpture, photography, film, dance, music, performance, as these disciplines have expanded, touched, or crossed previous boundaries and established new issues, combinations, or forms. The content of each piece is, above all, idiosyncratic - each involves private fantasy, and/or ritual on some level and communicates to the emotions as well as the mind of the viewer. In each case, two and three-dimensional elements are arranged in architectural spaces which in some way dictate the viewpoint of the spectators.

Evidence of this generic attitude can be found in all of the works. Though primarily frontal, Finley Fryer's **The Cat Band** invites the viewer to wander through the stained glass entrance and among the painted plaster "prop-performers." The inhumane overtones of the "performers" actions compete with the humorous absurdity of the subject matter and the raw technique of Fryer's process. Likewise, Phyllis Bramson's series of wall-to-floor tableaux, **Myths of Inspiration**, allows the viewer to explore the literal and mental spaces of her work - the references involve the actual motivations, decisions, and procedures of art-making processes on a metaphorical level. David Saunders' **Scope**, arranged in an enclosed space, employs literal and depicted images and references as allegories to realize universal concepts relating to conception, perception, and being in general, and to each individual spectator in particular. Story Mann, in **Possumhead**, psychologically intimidates his audience using a dramatic film of a domestic structure in flames, staged in an equally ominous scenic depiction of an outdoor environment. Bruce Gundersen and Robert Clark, in a performance entitled **Dagar Ane**, combine ambiguous movement and sound in a cryptic, elaborate structure. The broad implications and associations conveyed by the primordial tone of the event remain obscure for lack of specific references.

The occurrence of interdisciplinary experiments in art in the U.S. stems mainly from multimedia activities at Black Mountain College.¹ This was a small institution of diverse curricula founded in North Carolina in the early 1930s which attracted a number of visual artists, writers, dancers, and musicians. Brief spontaneous performances were often staged, perhaps as a result of the communal living and working arrangements. These theatrical "events" or "Happenings", as they were later termed, became the focus of collaboration for the various art disciplines. Sets and costumes created by artists for "Happenings" of the late 1950s and early 1960s were extensions of pictorial concerns and were sometimes exhibited as "environments" in galleries.² (For instance, Allan Kaprow's **Apple Shrine** (1959) was exhibited at Judson Gallery in New York City.)³ The "environments," according to Kaprow, were a response to Abstract Expressionist painting: "Pollock left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life."⁴ During the late 1960s and through to the present, dancers and dance companies (like Merce Cunningham, who was closely associated with the visual artists at Black Mountain College) and other theatrical groups have explored the possibilities of commissioning painters and sculptors to make stage sets, costumes, and scenic designs. Among the artists who participated were Alex Katz, Robert Morris, Ree Morton, Bruce Nauman, Isamu Noguchi, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Five of the six artists in the current exhibition have a painting background. Bramson's work may be seen as an example of what has been termed process art - not in the usual sense of using residual materials to suggest the physical procedure of making, but as a pictorial display of the decision-making process. At the same time, Bramson's background connects her to a theatrical approach to painting composition similar to that found in her fellow Chicago artists Jim Nutt and Roger Brown. Fryer's images function as two-dimensional props, the painted surfaces more predominant than their shallow forms. Saunders' **Scope** recalls religious and allegorical painting, expressed here in three-dimensional terms. Mann reproduces an outdoor scenic environment in a V-shaped space, emphasizing its pictorial perspective. Along with Saunders and Fryer, Mann employs an elaborate painted background which suggests a panoramic view. The geometric composition of Gundersen Clark's rich surfaces and textures also suggests a painterly approach and involves strong elements of pictorial perspective.

The decision-making processes of the six artists in the present series reflect involvement with the viewing public - an ambition to reach a broader audience by overcoming the psychological distance between the art work and the viewer in the traditional gallery or museum setting. As these artists see it, an audience accustomed to being totally entertained by the media and other elaborate forms of entertainment (Disneyland, sport "spectaculars," and so on) has developed the "art" of spectatorship to its utmost and demands a more aggressive approach. Entertainment, long looked down upon in the fine art tradition, has recently appeared in varying degrees in performance, video, film, music, and even can be detected in the continuing formal concerns of painting and sculpture (witness the indulgent use of fluorescent paint, glitter, jewels, and highly reflective surfaces by a number of contemporary artists).

Likewise, all five of these works activate the mental and physical space of the audience to make it more aware of its own presence. This is accomplished by encouraging physical participation within the space the work occupies - in the case of Bramson, Fryer, and Saunders - and by subjecting the viewer to vivid images of violence, in the case of Gunderson Clark and Story Mann. All are attempting to break down psychic as well as physical barriers between art and audience, to make the spectator aware of himself or herself as innocent bystander, voyeur, participant, whatever.

It is difficult to designate direct influences for these works, but precedents abound in the history of both the visual and performing arts. From the earliest times artists have been involved in building decors or "props" used in ritual or performance - all the way from tribal and religious ceremonies, to secular theater, to contemporary performance art. For example, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Italian artist of the seventeenth century, integrated his abilities as a sculptor and architect in the design of elaborate stage sets. In one production, a great deluge of water was staged and in another, artificial flames were devised which threatened to envelop the entire stage. In both instances the audience tried to flee the theater before well-planned, last minute procedures averted potential disaster.⁵ Since the early part of the twentieth century artists have attempted to occupy an interior space with singular or integrated art forms which are more intrinsically related to "art for art's sake." Kurt Schwitters, a German artist closely associated with the Dada movement (which also had a tendency to combine the pictorial and theatrical) in his first **Merzbau** (1926) filled an entire room with abstract plaster forms and objects which eventually extended to two floors over the several years of its construction. These more abstract concerns are evident recently in the work of Robert Irwin and Dan Flavin who concentrate on issues of visual perception.

The works in this exhibition appear to lie somewhere between the two concerns of theatricality and "pure" art. Like Bernini, Mann has also "staged" a fire, in this case on film. Yet, the elements arranged in the entry area of the Museum as well as those in the larger piece form integrated installations independent of live activity. Bramson's **Myths** recall religious tableaux or sequences like the early portrayals of the Stations of the Cross. However, Bramson's are totally self-referential, strictly concerned with private artistic processes that have been ritualized. Saunders' **Scope** suggests the elaborate cyclorama productions of the nineteenth century in which historical events were depicted; but in the case of Saunders the elements are metaphorical rather than representational, and the references are esthetic. Fryer, in his representation of an event, a performance by "The Cat Band," materialized as "props," provides an imaginary rather than a historical event. His integrated arrangement relates to such early installation works as Jim Dine's **The House** (1960) and Claes Oldenberg's **Bedroom Ensemble** (1963). Gundersen Clark's symmetrical, ritualistic activity, though obviously contemporary, recalls ancient ritual, early twentieth century (Futurist, Dadaist, and Constructivist) performance, as well as recent developments in contemporary performance - in its intimation of personal mythological activity, assaults on audience sensibilities, and combination of dance-like movements with simple body locomotion. The elaborate architectural structure works not only as a performance prop, but also as an independent, integrated work of art or sculpture.

In each of these works, the elements exist only in relation to each other: the spaces between - both actual and contextual - are the subject and content. In this way the elements serve as indexes to a larger theme. The multiplicity of media, methods, and messages is parallel to those of contemporary art in general, leaving open as many options as are filled.

Kathleen Thomas

Notes

1. Rosalee Goldberg, **Performance** (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 79.
2. Barbara Rose, **American Art Since 1900** (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1975), p. 274.
3. Review of exhibition at Judson Gallery, **Art News**, January, 1959, p. 12.
4. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
5. Howard Hibbard, **Bernini** (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc. 1965), p. 135.

Story Mann



The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the only source of true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, he who can no longer pause and wonder or stand rapt in awe is already half dead. His eyes are already shut.

Albert Einstein

Statement selected by the artist

Story Mann's work challenges today's sophisticated viewer and defies the cool objectivity which is expected of the seasoned spectator. He dares us to maintain a detached "aesthetic distance" by exploiting the gap between cultivated aesthetic contemplation and emotional instinct. His deliberate provocation demands a direct response.

Mann's work has a disturbingly raw impact. Its effect may intimidate or alienate, but ultimately the artist gets close to the viewer. Our very reactions implicate us as collaborators and, perhaps unknowingly or even unwillingly, we become participants in the environments Mann has created for us. In an age when post-minimalist paintings hang fashionably over so many mantelpieces, Story Mann reminds us that antagonism is a recurring characteristic of the avant-garde.

Mann's academic background was based in sculpture, but his work derives from a variety of media and emphasizes total environments rather than individual pieces. His earlier major works had outdoor settings. Architectural structures built by the artist were activated by a diversity of objects placed outside and within their actual space. Mann is skilled in woodworking and carpentry, having at times earned a living as a cabinetmaker, and his environments evidence his interest and ability in these pursuits. "I think it all comes from when I was a kid," he suggests. "We used to build things and dig tunnels I had no idea I wanted to get involved with art."

Born in North Carolina, 1953. Educated at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (1971-73), and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois (MFA 1977). Lives and works in Austin, Texas since 1977.

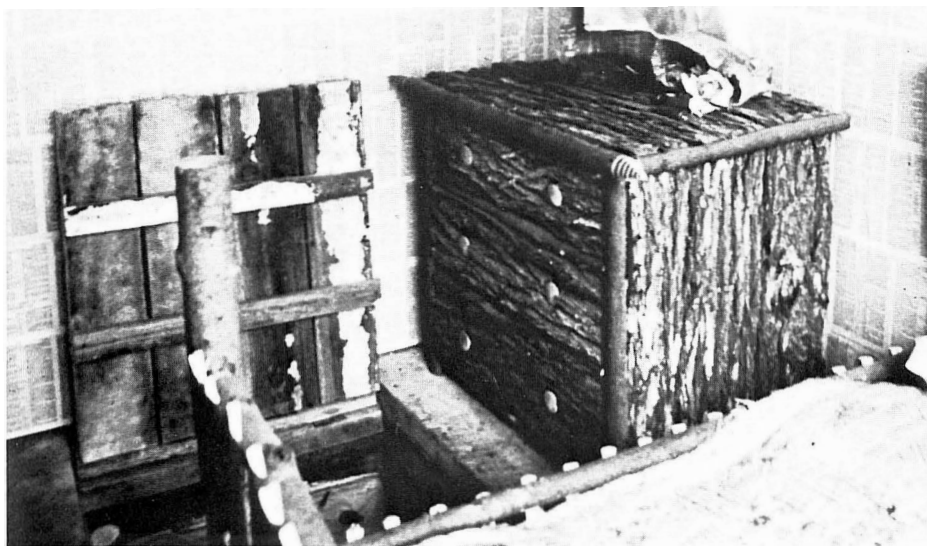
Selected Exhibitions

Solo

1976 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois



Cicero fire kills 4 in family



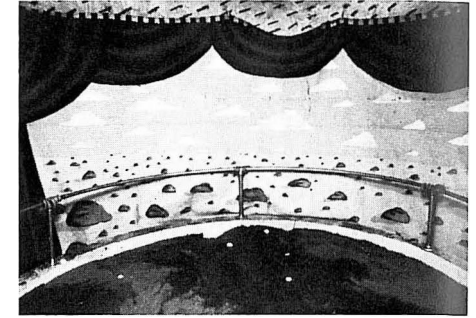
Story Mann
Midget Tower (interior), 1977

Group

- 1976 Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois
1134 Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1977 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois
- 1978 Art Park, Lewiston, New York

Midget Tower constructed in Chicago in 1977, was an awkwardly vertical split log, thatched roofed fortress ominously encircled by stuffed crows on rocky perches and "guarded" by two devilishly horned "scarecrows." Exclusive territoriality was further emphasized by bare lightbulbs strung from wooden poles surrounding the site, and by the straw-strewn earth that set this inauspicious area apart from the grassy green beyond. At night the scene was even more eerie: the lightbulbs flared in the dark, the electrically wired crows' eyes glared balefully and flames shot from the heads of the guardian devils.

The only approach to the structure was via a crude hand-hewn ladder and then across a rickety narrow hanging bridge without handrails. The cumulative effect of these threatening obstacles and the precarious means of entry was to intimidate the viewer while guarding against the violation of the **sanctum sanctorum**, the cryptic contents of the foreboding, windowless tower. Access was gained only by those who acquiesced to the required ritual.



*Story Mann
Midget Tower (interior), 1977*

*Story Mann
Midget Tower, 1977*

"The invitation," Mann reminds us, "is always harder to accept than the final act."¹ Upon penetrating the tower, the viewer/participant found a tiny room wall-papered in Bible pages and newspaper headlines proclaiming terrorism and violence. Assorted artifacts included pictures of a white-robed, haloed Christ and an American flag juxtaposed with a Ku Klux Klan costume from the artist's home state of North Carolina. A trap door led to a subterranean space which glittered from shards of beer bottles lodged in its plaster walls. There, plastic skeletons and flowers surrounded a giant model ship assembled by the artist in homage to H.C. Westerman's death ships. Back upstairs stood a miniature bed and bark-covered chest of drawers. Logically, **Midget Tower** actually provided a temporary home for a "crazy midget" Story Mann had befriended in Chicago.

The artist's next major project was accomplished on a grander scale. **Pop's Pavilion of Death**, created when Mann was artist-in-residence at Artpark, near Buffalo, New York, in the summer of 1978, was a windowless concrete structure similar in construction to a geodesic dome, 20 feet in diameter. This arcane fortress, likened by the artist to a mausoleum, was virtually impenetrable save through Mann's highly ritualized system. Encircled by a low rocky wall and a barbed wire fence, the pavilion was illuminated and further protected at night by a blazing ring of gas flames. This time the guards were alive, toting weapons and completely hidden behind sinister costumes and masks. Access was designed to be accomplished by first climbing a 35 foot rope ladder clinging to a bluff overlooking the Niagara River. Having scaled these heights, visitors had to crawl on their stomachs through a small tunnel which featured such attractions as bottled bats and the preserved remains of a two-headed pig.

Once the rites of entry had been observed, participants were confronted with a primitively decorated, closed environment incorporating stylized landscape murals, taped animal noises (supplemented by animal calls made on the spot by the guards), and a menacing variety of artifacts. A film of an actual tornado was an occasional feature, and a small circus ring in the center of the space provided the stage for live entertainments: knife-throwing, fire-breathing and rattlesnake-handling. The artist's pet bulldog, who suffered a broken leg and consequently was forced into a constant kneeling position, was billed as "The Praying Jerusalem Dog."

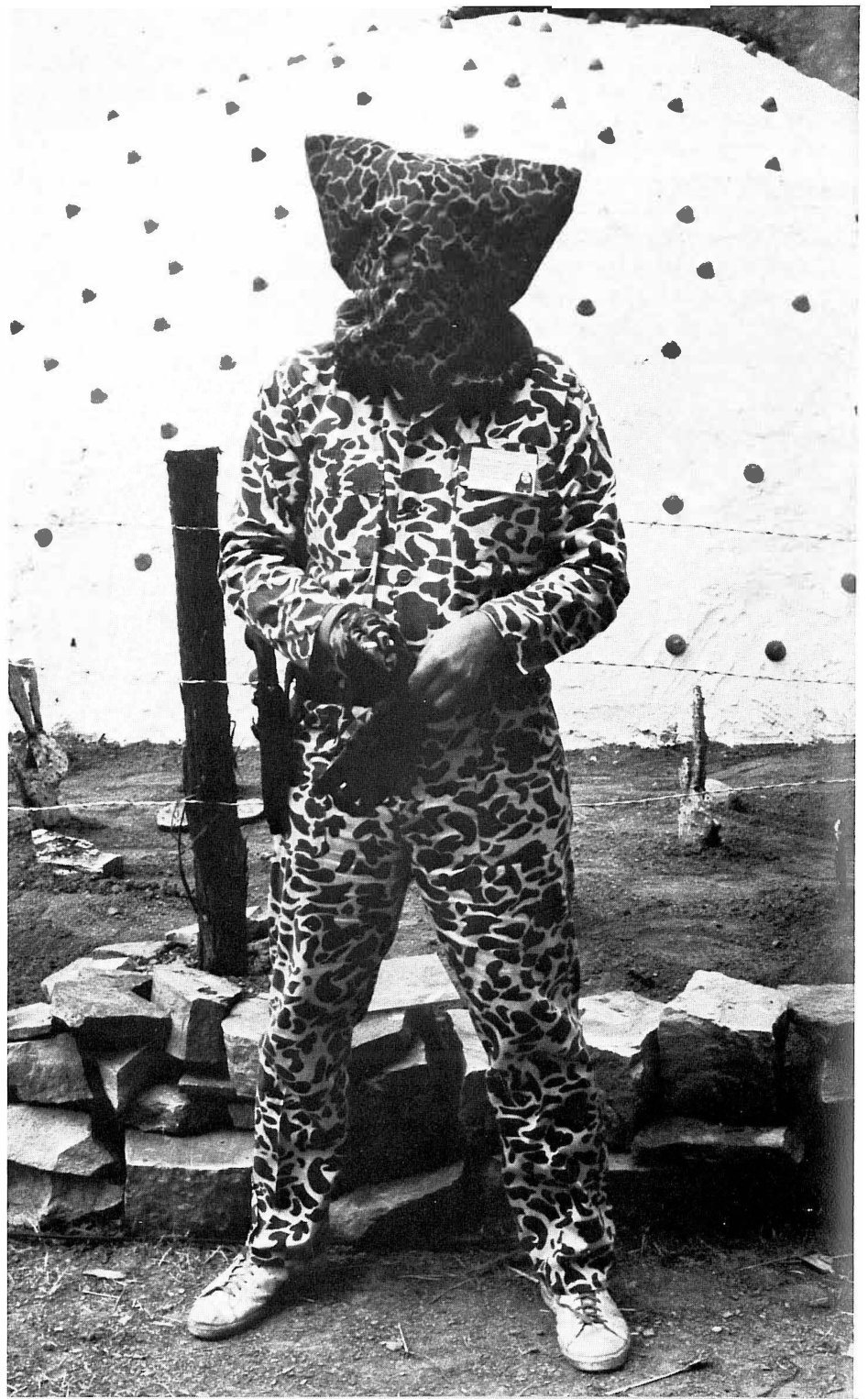
Here again, spectators entered only on the artist's terms. Mann and his cronies, anonymously concealed in their intimidating disguises, were in complete control. This time the right to exit was granted only at the whim of the masked guides, who occasionally enjoyed entertaining their guests longer than they might have wished. Submission was the obvious requisite to participation.

Possumhead, Story Mann's piece for The New Museum, draws from some of the sources found in earlier works, but is essentially different in several aspects. Significantly, it is situated within a pre-existing indoor space. Mann divides the site into two separate arenas. In the "inner sanctum" he recreates a barren Texas landscape - the kind of terrain found south of the Austin area where he now lives. Its focal point is a film featuring the symbol of a structure in flames. The format resembles that of a diorama, a scenic representation utilizing realistic natural elements and a painted background. Actual mesquite trees, brush and brittle grass have been brought from Texas and interspersed about the floor. Large painted canvases translate the landscape into two dimensions, extending the horizon. They are painted in broad, flat areas of color and are reminiscent of the highly stylized billboards and circus posters admired so much by the artist. Diminishing perspective is emphasized by the scaled placement of the three-dimensional landscape elements and by positioning the canvases in a V configuration which tapers toward and accentuates the focal point, the space onto which the film is projected. In effect, Mann has created a theater set, the set providing its own drama.

There is some irony to be found in the concept of transplanting a rugged Texas landscape to New York City, further extended by the actuality of recreating that environment within the neutral white walls of an art museum. Mann transforms the space into his own territory and attributes part of the inspiration for this piece to his interest in illusion and fake reality.

The reality he has chosen to simulate is a temperamental, barren Texas wilderness where the land is hard and unyielding, except for brush and spindly mesquite trees. This is no fertile landscape. It is a setting more conducive to wasting life than creating and nourishing it. Mann has charged the scene with the added suspense of an impending storm at dusk. The darkness, howling winds, thunder and lightning which we anticipate are hoary theatrical devices employed to allude to and intensify mysterious, frightening, and violent situations.

There is in any case a foreboding tension in the vast emptiness of the stark Texas wastelands. Those who inhabit them know they are not in fact as void of life as they appear; they are home to scavenging vultures, hawks, scorpions, tarantulas, coyotes, and deadly snakes. The people who populate them have traditionally been known as hard and tough, prepared to defend themselves against the wilds and, when necessary, against each other. This kind of environment inspired the thick boots, heavy chaps, and broad brimmed hats now symbolic of American folk culture. It embodies the hard, untamed spirit which is an essential part of the pioneering American legend.



Amidst this ominous native landscape the artist projects his devastating representation of a fundamental American icon: house and home. Using lead pipe as his material, Mann has reconstructed and filmed the rudimentary framework of the simplest kind of stylized house often drawn by young children. It is an immediately recognizable and accessible image, one to which most people can relate in some personal way. It provokes a broad range of associations, among them, almost inevitably, the comfort, security and protection a home can offer. The artist has in effect created a symbol of American home life, reducing it to an elementary outline and then cauterizing it in ruinous flames.

Mann filmed the burning house in the same foreboding environment he reproduces in the museum. There, amidst the great open spaces so prized in the history of this country, the artist symbolically lays waste to the basic icon upon which so many of our traditional values have been predicated. The chicken wire that separates the audience from the scene is not so much a barrier as a symbol of the viewer's likely refusal to accept the artist's statement.

The other half of the **Possumhead** installation relates more directly to the artist's personal life and draws directly from autobiographical sources. Unlike the adjacent landscape environment and film which were created especially for the museum audience, this space is activated by artifacts and objects Mann has created or collected for himself and by a videotape of a sport with which he has for some time been intrigued: dogfighting. Some of the photographs and assorted paraphernalia here relate to dogfighting. Others are records of people, places, and events from the artist's life. Still, others simply evidence Mann's own kind of black humor and fascination with things which menace, threaten, and intimidate: the bizarre, the mystical, violence, death and destruction. "This is a personal narrative of my life," says the artist, " - where I'm coming from, what I'm interested in and where I'm heading."

Despite the sinister content of many of the exhibited items there is something sentimental about their being safeguarded by the artist. Each obviously holds some special significance for him. There is the sense of a child's cigar box collection of trophies from a secret fantasy life. Here we are offered a chance to contemplate some of the residue and prizes from the artist's life and, consequently, an opportunity to gain access to the world of his imagination.

Mann's presentation of objects is certainly not naive, however, for many of these items were no doubt included because of their potential impact on the viewer. We are confronted with an aggressive display of paraphernalia. Associated meanings are held intact. We are not compelled to analyze these pieces on the basis of their formal composition. The artist is not concerned with justifying them as art or with brandishing any special refinement of the skills and processes he uses to convey the impact of his work. Indeed, much of his artistry lies in his ability to rely on external devices to create that impact.

The videotape by Mann featured in the **Possumhead** installation documents a two hour and thirty-five minute dogfight which took place recently in Commanche, Oklahoma. The artist has been fascinated by this illegal sport for the past two years and keep several bulldogs ("pit bull terriers") of his own, training them and entering them in matches across the county. In fact, this installation is dedicated to one his favorite dogs, named Possumhead, who died after a fight in Atlanta, Georgia. In Mann's words:

A dogfight is almost like the ultimate piece of art. You've got a big place with 30 or 40 dogs, and all kinds of machines to work them on - treadmills and the big round tables they run on. It's a huge environment - doghouses, the whole thing of feeding the dogs, walking the dogs... It's the most insane thing in the world. You've got 400 people in bleachers standing up, saying, "I'll get 100 to 50 here," and "100 to 75 over here." It's like a fucking tobacco auction.

Mann is obviously attracted to the energetic theatrical environment in which the fights are staged, and he is also drawn to the subculture in which the sport thrives. He tells us about his introduction to dogfighting through an acquaintance who has subsequently become a close friend and powerful influence:

People who fight dogs are real strange... When I first got to Texas about two years ago I met this old guy about 60 years old who raises bulldogs to fight. He's been a fucking outlaw all his life. I could do some things that are pretty goddamn evil, but I seriously believe that he has no conscience at all. In some ways that's bad, but it also gives you a completely different outlook on life because you don't have a lot of inhibitions... If he finds something that bothers you - a hang up you've got - he'll really twist the knife on it. I think I was a little like that before I met him and that's probably why I get along with him so well.

Story Mann twists the knife in his liberal museum audience by confronting us with a graphic depiction of a bloodbath involving man's best friends. He transgresses the realm of acceptable source material and good taste even as they are loosely and broadly defined by many worldly adherents to the avant-garde. He gives us a vivid portrait of an event which is both illegal and taboo in our culture and dares us to objectify it and translate it into yet another "civilized" art world viewpoint.

We live in a society which consumes meat but never sees the slaughter and which technically sanctions only violence which it has prescribed necessary and socially acceptable. Cognizant of this detachment, Mann challenges us to witness a crude and bloody struggle and spares us none of its reality. In so doing he offers us a jolting reminder of our temporal state and a dramatic sense of our own mortality. His reminder that we are of the moment blood and guts could more vividly substitute for the stern Biblical injunction, "Dust thou art..." Mann anticipates his audience's reaction:

I think people may be repulsed by the videotape, but they could really start enjoying it if they could get past the initial shock and finally realize that the dogs are acting on untamed instincts which human beings have suppressed. Those dogs are fighting for their lives. They don't fight because of race or creed or color.

Dogfighting is a violent thing, but the dogs thrive on it. The people like to watch it. So in a way it's a real ambivalent violence because everybody is enjoying it... To me, life is about seeing things and accepting them without necessarily agreeing with them. People just don't accept a lot of things, and they aren't always the same things for all the same people.

Although the will of the majority has outlawed Mann's brand of violence, it remains a source of high entertainment and pleasure for a devoted subculture. The artist is certainly not attempting to proselytize us to become dogfight enthusiasts, but he does dare us to observe and acknowledge something of the ferocity in the interplay between life and death when that interplay has not been muted, repressed or transposed into substitutes determined more palatable and acceptable by our society.

Freud argues that our instincts actually impel us towards death. As we become more sophisticated creatures, the detours we devise before reaching our final aim become more complicated, but he points out: "These circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts, would thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life."²

Freud reminds us that violence is a feature of life in all societies from family to State, that there is that within us which is so bloody and shameless it hides in dreams. Mann confronts us with our own nightmares. His black humor, his fascination with the sinister and macabre, and his blatant intrigue with the bloody aggression of the dogfight are attempts to be in touch and come to terms with unchanneled instinct. They represent the artist's repudiation of the restraints and values imposed by a society whose successful existence depends much on the redirection and repression of that instinct.

Mann acknowledges the dual nature of violence by recognizing it as characteristic of the instincts which both create and destroy life. He is fascinated by its natural energy, spontaneity and ferocity. He admires it as a force which ultimately overrides and exceeds the bounds of institutions and imposed rules of behavior. At the same time, he reminds us that what gives us the greatest passion for life also threatens to destroy us.

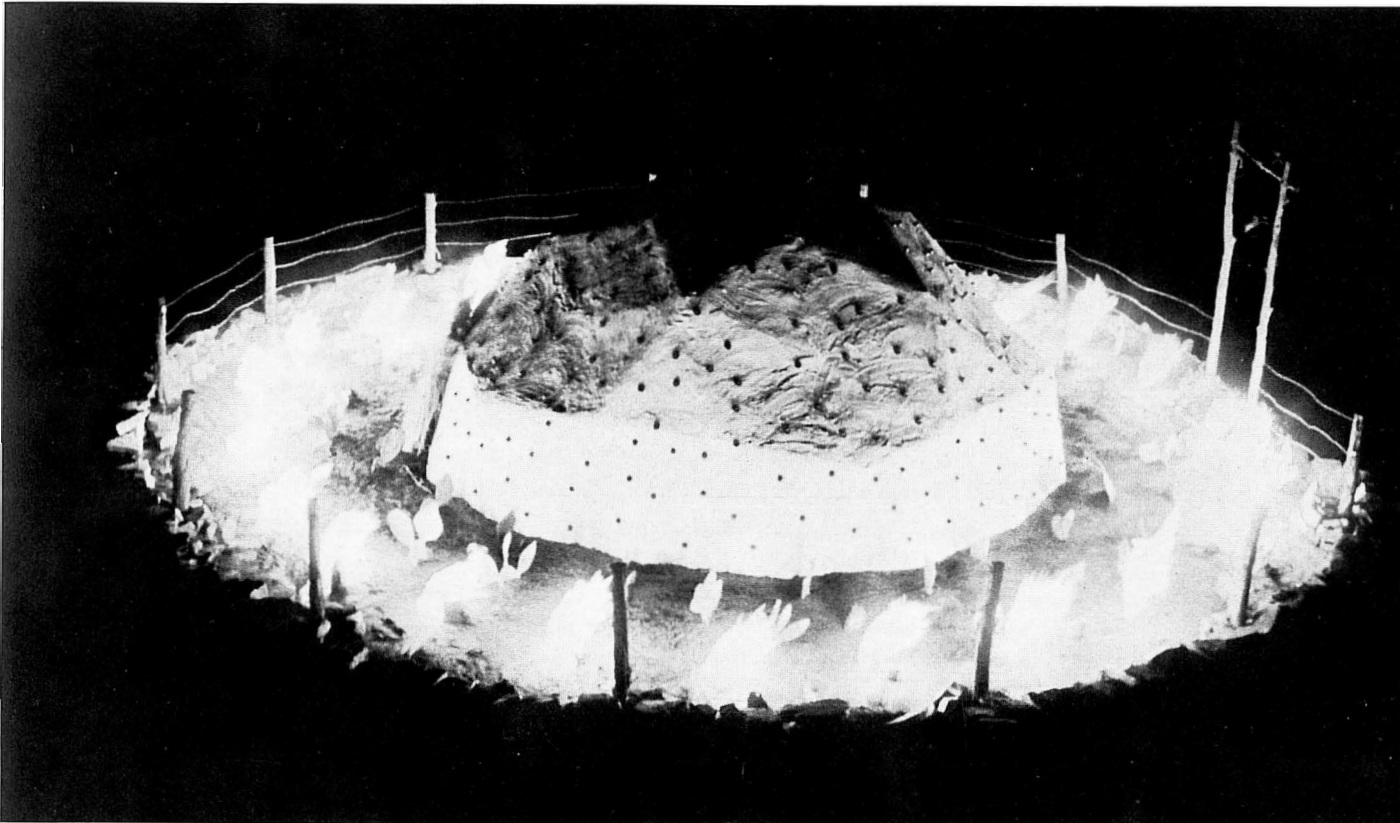
Dieter Morris Kears

1 All quotes by Mann are taken from conversations with the author in January, 1979

2 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York, 1967), p. 71.

Story Mann

Pop's Pavilion of Death (interior), 1978



Finley Fryer



My work is devoted to the musical performance of cats confined within various invented instruments. *The Cat Band's* sick humor is a measure of human nature; the churchlike windows illuminate the incongruities and erratic voltage within us all. The relationship between the band and the windows is one of several separate yet supportive entities. As a whole, they form a structured madness far removed from lukewarm necessities of an outside world. Inside the church you can hear the cats wailing away on a new tune.

Walking into Finley Fryer's installation piece, **The Cat Band**, the viewer is immediately confronted by four pointed-arch stained glass windows set in a wall built at the far end of the exhibition space. The windows, in an indebtedness to our folk art tradition, present an air of informality about making and conceiving, as various apparently arbitrarily cut multicolored veils of transparent plastic overlap and intrude on one another. Their arrangement calls to mind excessive random collages, like the scrap pile of a craftsman's studio. The windowed wall demarcates the space of the piece, the inner sanctum of the artist's conception. The religious allusion is unmistakable, yet, paradoxically, it is traditional solemnity placed in flux. The active elements of the windows fight, bounce, collide, as if to escape their enframed confines. This is the profane world of unspoken fantasies, of contradiction, incongruity, sacrilege, suspicion, and of love, respect, piety, and reality, too.

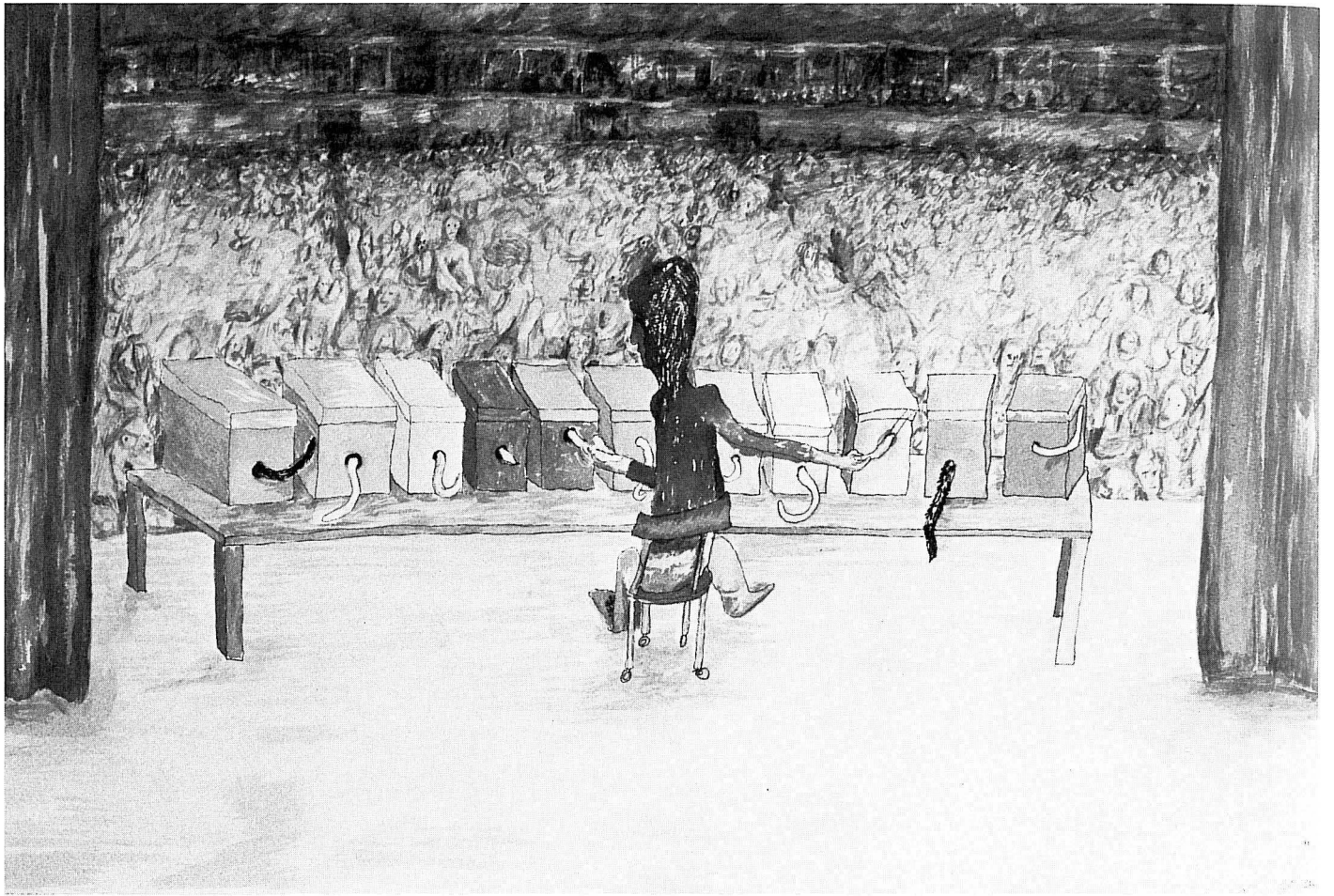
Born in Santa Monica, California, 1952. Educated at University of California at Davis (BA 1976). Lives in San Francisco, California.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1976 University of California at Davis, California
- 1979 42 Woodward Gallery, San Francisco, California



Finley Fryer
The Cat Band, 1978
Pencil on paper
18" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit David Miller



Finley Fryer
Performance at the Cat Organ, 1978
Watercolor on paper
22" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit David Miller

Turning our backs on the windows, we encounter a band of four musicians and a vocalist. They, like the visual artist, manipulate their artistic tools, but these musicians don't move, for they are props, life-size dummies, or surrogates - constructed as they are - frozen in the act of creation. Their instruments are not traditional strings or brass or keyboards, but are cats confined and manipulated in various ways, primarily imprisoned in boxes. The female vocalist, clutching a cat's neck, holds its mouth to a microphone as she yanks its tail. The xylophone player is about to pound on the heads of the proper "notes," a cat for each. The string player plucks his cat tail strings. The organist pumps the tails of his feline "ivories." And the percussionist is about to strike drums and cymbals with cat heads and tails strategically positioned inside them.

Some might call this "orchestration" sick, others funny, and still others perverse; it's all of these and more. **The Cat Band** represents the artist's attempt to honestly and directly express the duality of art and life, of experiences, relationships, and attitudes. Love/hate, respect/mockery, creation/destruction reside equally in the same space and time. In his constant attempt to grasp onto the reality of existence, Fryer reveals an analytical approach to himself and the world around him. Our culture's accelerated emphasis on personal analytic consciousness-raising processes has resulted in their making their way into our everyday fabric of thought mechanisms and surfacing in the actualization of that awareness.

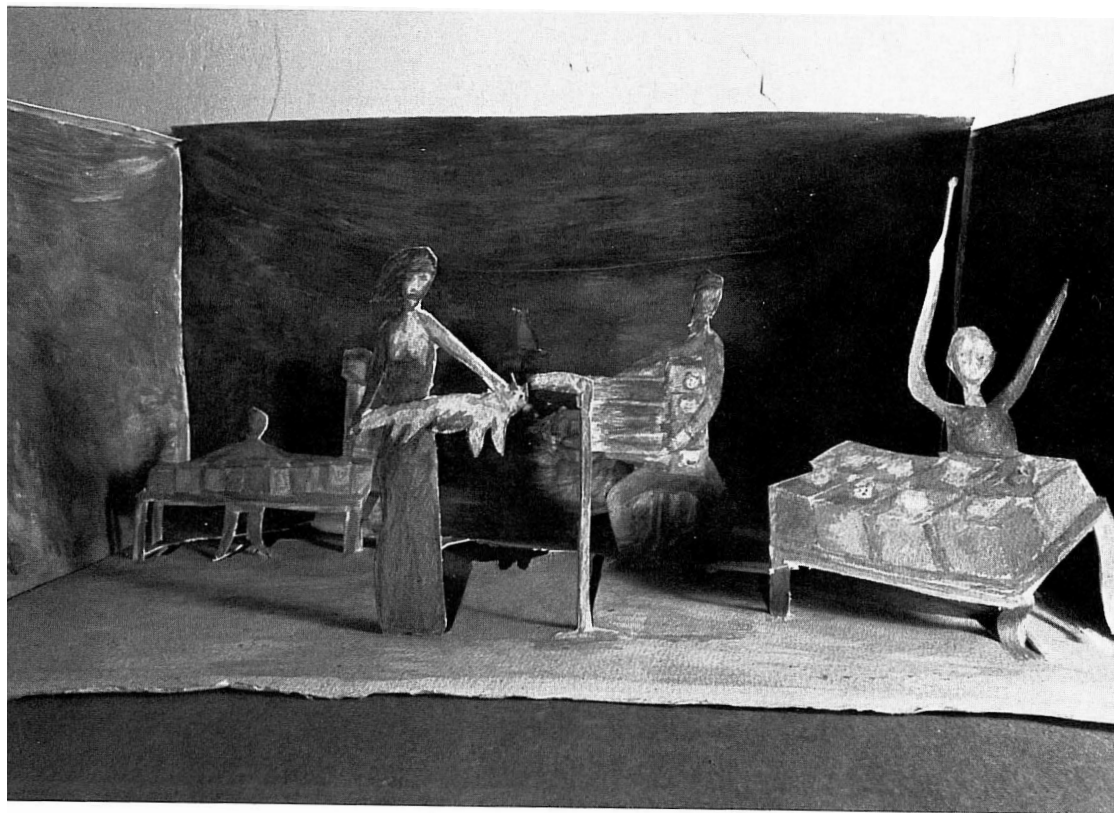
Fryer has devoted the last two years exclusively to **The Cat Band**. It began with drawings and watercolors of **The Cat Organ**. Soon the repertoire encompassed the entire band. "Some of the watercolors started 'lifting off,'" thus necessitating a realization in the third dimension, with the more active confrontation thus engendered. Different facets of Fryer's life have directly entered the work. He was introduced to stained glass techniques when he got a job restoring church windows. The contrast of spending most of his time in churches, and then entering the "real" world, presented "extremes which seemed to enter into my work." Likewise, Fryer is a musician and composer who plays piano, banjo, fiddle, and guitar. Similarly, he has always loved various kinds of animals. "Cats would just start following me around. Here in San Francisco I have about fifteen wild cats in my yard."

The cat expresses a multitude of concepts in his work. Cherished and respected, cats - like other pets - permit their owners to channel feelings, emotions, and hostilities on to them; Fryer's cats are an outlet through which to project human dilemmas, and act as alter-egos. Yet cats are not unconditionally responsive; they have strong wills and desires of their own. They are also reputed to be independent, surreptitious, elusive, and sinister. "There's the idea of the chemical detachment cats have." Thus we find most of Fryer's cats encased in boxes, physically and psychologically withdrawn from their tormentors. The act of beating the animals - of forcing them to do something they neither want nor need to engage in - is like beating your head against a wall. In the context of the frozen moment depicted in the installation, a perpetual primal scream has been induced to which the human musicians, in their engaging ritual, seem unresponsive and oblivious. On another plane, Fryer's cats can be seen as the elusive female, thus represent the difficulty of mutual relationship in emotional/sexual affairs. "The work has to do with female relationships and trying to get perspective on that." Perhaps, then, the female vocalist is a double portrait of a woman partially mutilating herself as she reveals herself to the world.

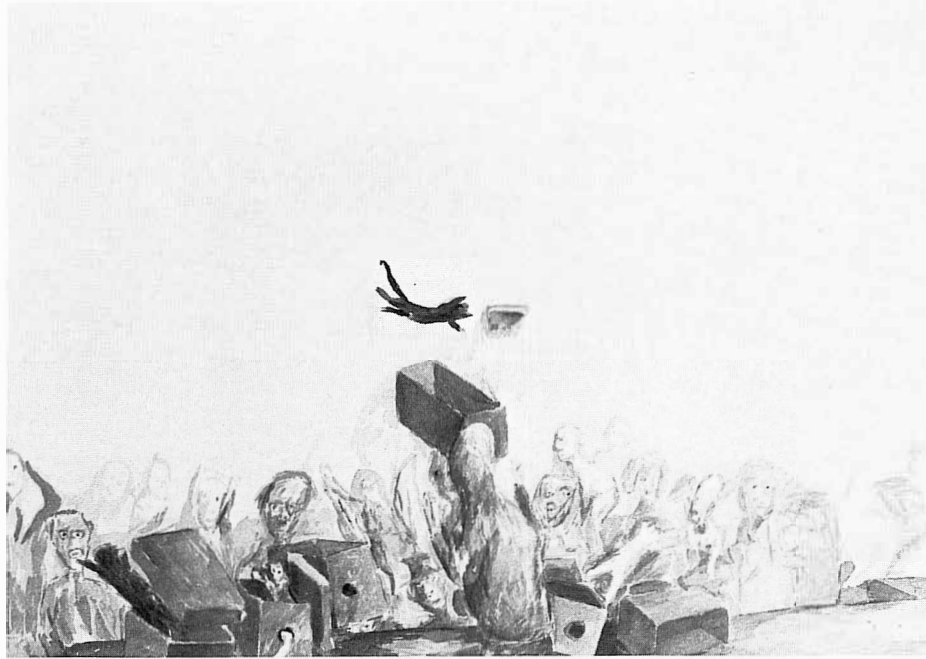
Stylistically, the work maintains a characteristic double edge. Fryer prefers a muted palette of somber, yet neutral blue/grays. Cosmetic elements, such as the vocalist's dress (and its brilliant purplish/orange coloration) or the cat boxes (and their spectral range) are punctuated by accents of vibrant tone. Similarly, the "anti-style" of the figures and drawings with their rough, scratchy, expressionistic lines makes for an unconcerned, exuberant demeanor. The life-size figures are constructed of painted stucco over a chicken wire armature supported by plywood. Their surfaces are unmannered yet complete; however, their unfinished backs - with the ends of nails clearly revealed on the unpainted plywood - reveal the reality of art fabrication and determine a dangerous and threatening posture. If we concern ourselves with these works solely on the frontal visual level, then the viewer assumes the more passive role of observing from a few fixed points. The menacing and sinister backs of the figures, when incorporated into our conception and experience of the piece, nonetheless, keep the viewer in check. Ultimately, the artist has left final judgment to the viewer as to what he/she is willing to accept as integral visual or conceptual elements of the piece.

Fryer's black humor reveals a taboo realm of wishes and fantasies rarely dealt with so frankly in the realm of high art. His wit, as well as his narrative focus, bears resemblance to that of Edward Gorey, the popular writer and illustrator, while Fryer works in a raw style, Gorey in an elegant Edwardian manner. In the attempt to make a more "accessible" artistic statement - through the use of recognizable and loaded images and narrative and the sheer impact of the size of the installation - Fryer's methods encompass the illustrational; with the proplike figures, the dramatic subject matter and presentation, and a direct indebtedness to other artistic traditions, he enters a deliberately theatrical arena. And by depicting activity in progress, Fryer heightens and sustains the engagement with his characters, yet supersedes the temporality of live performance, for these performers function as surrogates, much in the manner of Dennis Oppenheim's marionette pieces.

Finley Fryer
Cat Band on Stage, 1978
Assemblage
12" x 30" x 12"
Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit David Miller



Finley Fryer
Finale, 1979
Watercolor on paper
22" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit David Miller



The strong religious elements in **The Cat Band** - made direct by the stained glass windows - are not denied by Fryer. First of all, the cat, with its power of detachment, can be interpreted as a mediator or cultural observer, who, like most artists, strives for objective clarity within a subjective world view. So too does religion, like art, depend on the involvement of the participant for the breadth of its vitality and meaning. There is a ritualistic aspect to the musicians' activity in **The Cat Band**, who perform for the entertainment of others, yet are oblivious to the anguish they may simultaneously project on the cats, who, like suffering martyrs, accept their fate in a detached, apparently emotionless way; we viewers, like "blind believers," are willing to accept this enactment or rite as symbolic, thus as removed from our direct reality, a fact reinforced by the separation between the work as constructed and our reality as lived. As a whole, the work suggests a crisis in artistic autonomy and ideational communication. Again, religion, like a work of art, "is a flat thing that can lift off and become a living reality" through conviction and passionate communication.

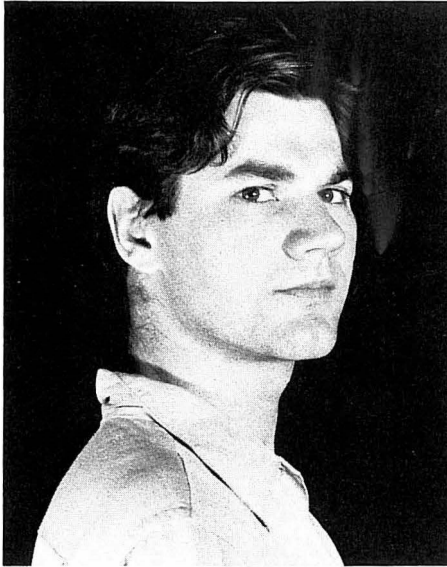
How is it that religion has become a prime element in an artist's work in 1979? For one thing, the last ten years have witnessed a marked emphasis on the importance of the viewer's direct participation within the work of art. In Fryer's work we find a questioning as to the nature of belief as a necessary involvement of the viewer for actualization. Yet there is an ambiguous question - consciously left open - as to whether the viewer participates through a rationally analytic process or through blind faith. Fryer's work can also be seen as a rechanneling of the sublime away from the work (such as Rothko's late paintings) to the viewer, so that the ambiguity resides in our experience rather than in the work of art itself.

Finally, our tendency to regard the museum as a kind of sacred house of worship, as a repository of hidden truths, seems to be addressed by the religious parallels, thus identifying the art work as a didactic and spiritual tool for providing the viewer with perspective on his/her own realities. To this end Finley Fryer, in his environmental work - determining its own context and installation - is attempting to redefy meaning in art within a society so secularized that such recent taboos as "belief" and "the spiritual" are being supplanted into recently nonreligious domains, such as art. Likewise, the partially antagonistic stance assumed by Fryer with his controversial subject matter, mark a turn in art toward a new attitude of consciously and directly sought dialog, of wanting to actively direct or provoke the viewer to determine his/her own stance and threshold of acceptance, and to reopen communication in the ever-increasing artistic, emotional, and psychological isolationism of the 1970s.

Allan Schwartzman

1 All quotes made by Fryer in conversation with the author, May 1979.

David Saunders



David Saunders combines elements from both literary and painting traditions to form the images that embody his particular vision. To some extent, his belief in nature, intuition, and representational metaphor reflect the values of the nineteenth century movements of Romanticism, PreRaphaelitism, and Symbolism. Saunders' preoccupation with literature, especially Shakespeare, and his fascination with the pastoral make for a sensibility somewhat anomalous in light of the prevailing interest in industrial materials, urbanism, and autobiographical experience of his contemporaries. However, his eclecticism, strict avoidance of any specific doctrine, and rigorous self-scrutiny preclude mere revivalism, and his open-ended approach and interest in diverse materials and spatial contexts are in keeping with the heterogenous stance of current art.

Anything used to describe the subtle differences
could never describe the great Harmony.

Born in New York, New York, 1954. Educated at
Kansas City Art Institute (BFA 1974). Lives in New
York, New York since 1974.

Selected Exhibitions

Solo

1977 Artificial Gallery, New York, New York

Group

1973 Walnut Street Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri

1973 Kemper Art Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri



*David Saunders,
Scope, 1979
Work in progress
Installation, mixed media
18' x 18'
Courtesy of the artist*

David Saunders,
Lady Macbeth, 1978
Pastel on paper
24" x 36"
Courtesy of the artist



Scope, Saunders' installation for the present exhibition, may be regarded in some ways as a contemporary artist's version of a pastoral. Playing off a literary form interpreted by artists from Claude Lorraine through, at least, Henri Matisse, **Scope** stresses nature's purifying and restorative powers and its benefits for those close to it. Saunders recognizes the important contribution various traditions have made to his work. "It is wise to have faith in the productions of time. It is our perception from their boundaries that is infinite, and within their ring that we find our viewpoints."¹ The title of the installation reveals that his desire to, "recall our awareness of the nature of things [i.e. nature itself] is from a limited perceptual spectrum."¹ The Greek origin of "scope," *skeptesthai* - "to watch, to look at, or consider" - aptly conveys his intention to produce a contemplative work.

In this piece, the benign attributes of nature are personified by a woman, a Lady Bountiful, painted on the underside of an artificial pond placed in the middle of the installation. The image was inspired by a traditional character of Celtic myths, the water nymph. Saunders specifically cites the character known as the Lady of the Fountain in **The Mabinogian**, a cycle of ancient Welsh tales and, later, as the Lady of the Lake in Arthurian legend. In spirit, **Scope** is reminiscent of the playfulness of **Midsummer Night's Dream**, echoing Queen Titania's solicitous orchestration of the activities of the wood fairies. The installation is also associated with the allegorical tradition of a garden. Ever since the Greek myths and the Old Testament, gardens (or occasionally tamed woods, such as that of **Midsummer Night's Dream**) have stood for arenas, even catalysts of human encounters, conflicts, and reconciliations with the spiritual. Saunders' garden, is a setting affirming one's ties with nature. The importance of the garden in substantiating a particular world view is exemplified by the innovative, naturalized English landscape garden of the eighteenth century, devised in accord with the tenets of incipient Romanticism. **Scope's** resemblance to it lies not only in that both are designed to be conducive to gentle meditation, but also that they blur the delineation between artifice and reality, synthetic and authentic nature.

Scope is Saunders' furthest exploration of the conflict and interdependence of actual and pictorial space. Here, the artist's figuration fills an entire room, in a manner with precedents in the work of such artists as Claes Oldenbourg, Red Grooms, Edward Kienholz, and Allan Kaprow, traceable to the venerable connection between visual artists and stage design. Not only has Saunders worked as an assistant on the construction of various installation works by other artists, he has also built unusual stage sets for various theater and dance productions and made numerous films of his own. The spatial structure of **Scope** places viewers **in medias res**, encouraging them to circle the pool, as do the painted animals bordering the piece. The viewer may be beguiled into an Alice-like quandary - and try to distinguish the living components from the artificial ones, the painted from the photographic and "real" elements. Like a theater set, Saunders' installation does not depend on an interaction with people (as ritual or a performance would), but may be enlivened by participating viewers.



Flora and fauna play important roles in **Scope**. On the walls enclosing the piece on three sides are mounted painted images of elf-like animals, two or three feet high, who act as friendly guardians, establishing a mood for the interior. The floor is covered with hay and artificial leaves, divorcing the piece from its architectural space and stressing its organic element. The pond, approximately 8 feet by 8 feet, depicts the woman previously described, in blues and greens. Tiny, real minnows and aquatic plants accentuate the vitality of the pond, with a similar function to accent colors in a painting. Suspended from the ceiling and encircling the pond, large living plants strengthen the significance of the central figure. To relate the piece more closely to the out-of-doors, Saunders projects on the walls slide images of a slowly changing blue summer sky. Like the floor covering, the projection encourages the viewer to imagine **Scope's** ties to nature as it exists beyond the confines of the exhibition space. **Scope** may be viewed as a fragment of Saunders' larger conception of nature which he has chosen to actualize. "The significance of the work is such that it should exist in even the most unsanctimonious surrounding of hay and clutter."

*David Saunders,
King John, 1978
Plaster replica
12" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist*

The unusual character of Saunders' work suggests that it may have survived from a unique, unidentifiable world. He has done classical style portraits that have the appearance of ripped-out sections of partially eroded frescoes. Others depict similarly rendered faces, but drawn in pastel, on top of commercial prints, like political posters from China and nineteenth century etchings. In addition, Saunders paints animals such as goats, ducks, and most recently, nesting birds. For the last three years, he has concentrated on portraying Shakespearean characters, whom he considers to be enduring embodiments of essential qualities, human representations of facets of nature. In keeping with his hybridization of fine art and mass media, the prosaic and poetic, he uses photos of famous modern actors, such as Lawrence Olivier and John Gielgud in Shakespearean roles as prototypes for his portraits.



*David Saunders,
King Lear, 1978
Plaster replica
24" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist*



*David Saunders,
Nest, Bird and Egg, 1979
(Component of Scope)
Oil on wood
24" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist*

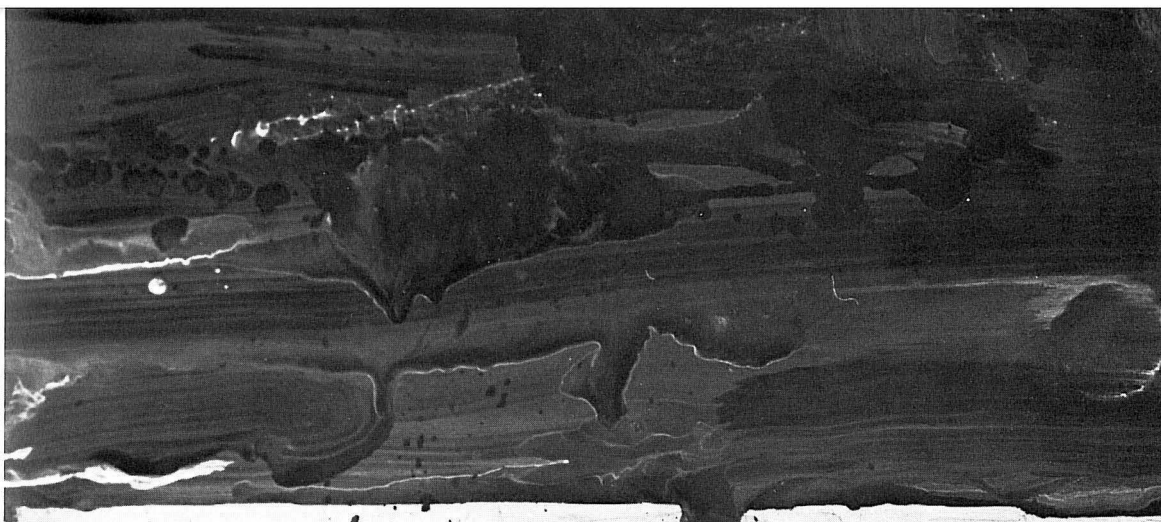
Implicit in Saunders' pieces is the confrontation and merging of three-dimensional space and painterly illusion. The antiquated appearance of the frescoes sets his images apart from the routine as well as the contemporary and conveys his reverence for the painted image. Paradoxically, these flat depictions are integrated with a solid 3-inch ground of plaster, thus alluding to the multi-leveled dependence of pictorial representation on three-dimensional space. The round and irregular edges of the piece, often softened by lace, straw, or fabric, subtly indicate the transition from the illusion to the wall. In Saunders' drawings, the double-exposure effect of printed and drawn image disorients the viewer and encourages a distinction between the original image and the added one - the figure and the ground. The arbitrary nature of pictorial scale is also emphasized. For instance, a drawing of Lady Macbeth utilizes salmon of prize-winning proportions from a Chinese fishing scene as highlights for her hair. In some ways, this drawing may have served as the impetus for *Scope*, in which the female figure, who is seen from a similar profile view, is blended with real miniature fish.

Saunders has long been involved with experimentation with materials and process. He graduated from Kansas City Art Institute with a degree in sculpture, but had also specialized in painting and ceramics. His concern for handicraft still manifests itself in the weavings sometimes used to support the frescoes and in his self-devised means of monoprinting on wet plaster. This method allows for partial destruction of the original image and for chance occurrences, as if Saunders was pitting the strength of the image against that of the materials. He often includes unusual materials like bits of nineteenth century Persian tile, colored lace, or brick-printed material. He has noted that a more accurate term for the "found object" might be the "given object," since the artist often stumbles across these elements, rather than purposely searches for them. His work incorporates things that previously functioned in practical ways - propaganda posters, textile design, and wall decoration - and reinterprets the "given objects" within an overall conception. For example, the Persian tile horseman inserted in the fresco, **King John** (1978), recalls how returning Crusaders introduced the exoticism of the Middle East to Medieval Europe. Materials in **Scope**, assume an even more active role by virtue of their metaphoric value. Hay and leaves are literally and figuratively the ground; live fish and plants encompass the figure who represents life.

Saunders' freewheeling approach parallels the attitude of the troubadors (literally "finders") who did not consider themselves inventors but finders of themes, tales, and songs which they adapted according to their impulses and lyrical sense. Saunders refrains from formulating any system of specific symbols or allegories. He recently explained, "I have no faith in any science or symbology. We hurtle words at each other, but it's through, or in spite of, this barrage, we come to understand. There is only one thing that an artist says, over and over again. And people know what it is. We all actually understand each other." Saunders' esthetic view seems to be simply that the content of a sincere work of art transcends its form. This belief frees Saunders to choose or be "given" any material, style, or image that suits his needs or whims. Since a work's content must always be part of a larger sense of nature, therefore already existing, he is not compelled to invent it and needs only to discover forms which convey it. Saunders maintains that worthwhile art expresses the intrinsic phenomenon of nature, as experienced in meditative states and sees art-making as fundamentally "sensing the harmony of the world." At the same time, he believes art must assert its worldly and immediate character; therefore he chooses to use recognizable, accessible images and to emphasize their materials and construction. So Saunders, a maker, preserver, and discoverer, establishes bonds to the romantic tradition and an essential experience of nature.

Susan Logan

1. All quotes by Saunders are taken from several conversations with the author in May, 1979.



*David Saunders,
Isabella, 1979
Pastel on paper
48" x 36"
Courtesy of the artist*



SHAKESPEARE,
The Taming of the Shrew

(All photos taken by the artist)

Phyllis Bramson



Theater and performance are aspects that continue to be significantly crucial to my image making. The past two summers were spent studying mime, as well as participating in performance workshops. I have always considered myself a humanist, involved with a private mythology and interested in expressing philosophical views about life and one's role as an artist/observer. Usually my images appear as allegorical and theatrical tableaux involving some sort of moral conflict and the illusion and symbol of actual thoughts. Through conviction that is mostly intuitive, I like to "talk" about ideas - and then measure things against or with them.

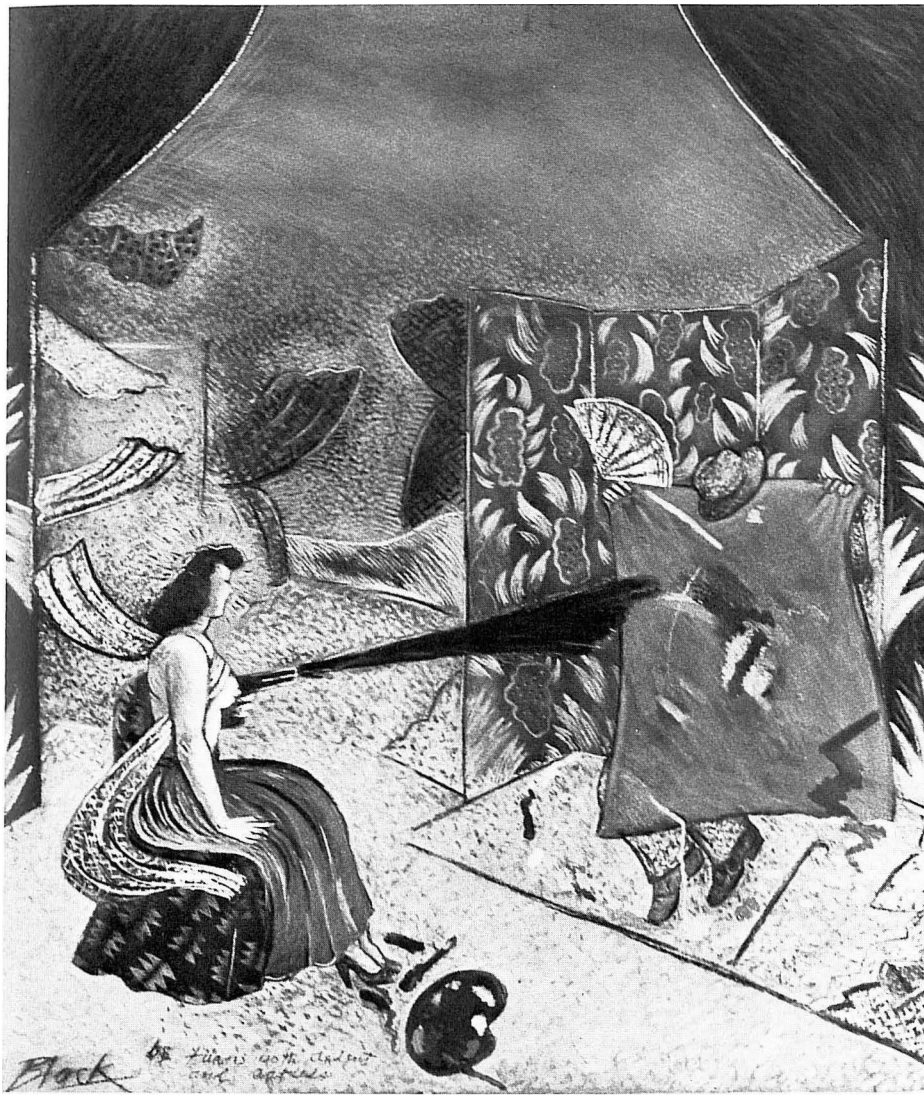
Phyllis Bramson frankly admits she wanted to be an actress but her inhibitions as well as strong artistic inclinations thwarted the ambition. In recent years, references to theater have surfaced in her drawings and paintings with increasing frequency and intensity. Masks, costumes, fans, vaudevillian canes, flats, curtains, and stages fill and direct Bramson's highly active and colorful fields. Animate objects collide and interact with female figures who are usually in the midst of performing, or exhibiting themselves. These works depict metaphoric incidents which examine emotional, psychological, and artistic conflict. Bramson's protagonist is an artmaker caught between the demands of her materials - jumping paint, moving canvases, and the risks of exposure and confrontation.

Born in Madison, Wisconsin, 1941. Educated at University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois (BFA 1963), University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin (MA 1964), and School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (MFA 1973). Lives in Chicago, Illinois.

Selected Exhibitions

Solo

- 1973** Illinois Arts Council Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1976** "Autobiographic Shelves," Artemesia Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1977** Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, New York
- 1978** Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois



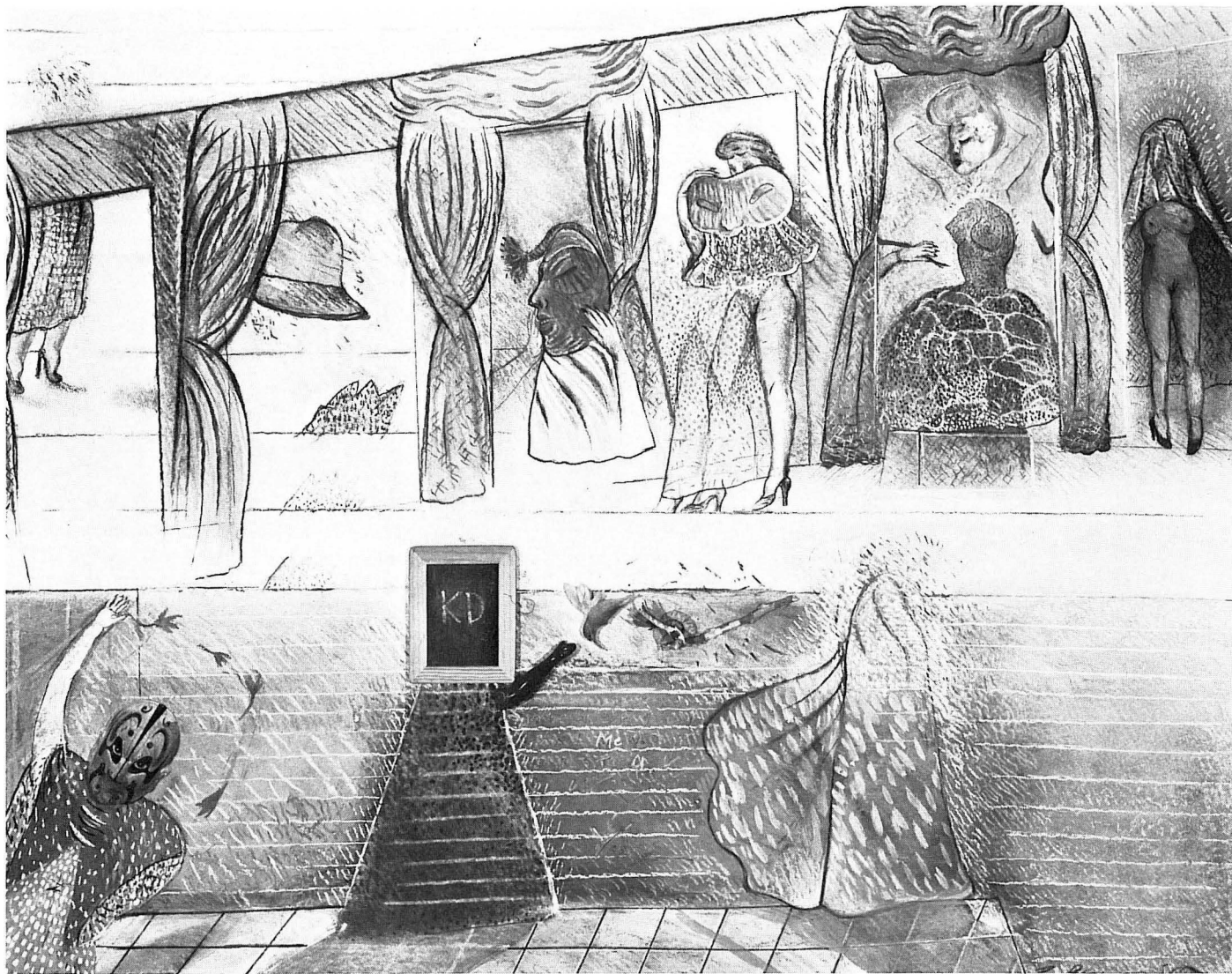
Myths of Inspiration is Bramson's first attempt to realize her concepts as an installation. The piece consists of ten tableaux which extend from the wall to the floor. Each explores Bramson's personal or fantasized myths concerning art making. Her myths emphasize the mystery of the creative process and Bramson's reliance on impulse and intuition. **Myths** elaborates aspects of drawings collectively titled, **Dancing the Black Away** (1978), which portray various intrusions and integrations of life into art and vice versa. For example, in one drawing, a seated bare-breasted woman who is shooting paint with a gun onto a large canvas, indicates her daredevil attitude toward the challenge of making art. Bramson characterizes her method of art-making as improvisational. Attributing this to the influence of her schooling during the late fifties and early sixties, she states she "just can't avoid the desire to battle it out directly on the paper or canvas."¹ Her installation is also improvised to a certain extent since she is "addressing the wall as a page."

Phyllis Bramson
Dancing the Black Away, 2, 1979
Pastel, crayon, and charcoal on paper
40" x 45"
Courtesy of the artist

- Group**
- 1963** Wisconsin State Festival of the Arts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 1964** Wisconsin State Festival of the Arts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 1970** "New Horizons '70," Chicago, Illinois

- 1971** "A New Constellation," Wabash Transit Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- "Woman '71," Northern University, DeKalb, Illinois
- 1972** "Renaissance, Art for Young Collectors," University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

- 1974** One Illinois Center, 5 Chicago Artists, Chicago, Illinois
- "Dolls for Adults," Artemesia Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- "57th Exhibition of Chicago and Vicinity," Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
- 1975** "New Horizons '75," Chicago, Illinois
- Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin



1976 "New Talent," Monique Knowlton Gallery,
New York, New York
"Object as Poet," Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.

1977 "76th Chicago and Vicinity," Art Institute of
Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
"Midwest Figurative Painters," Madison Art
Center, Madison, Wisconsin
"Object as Poet," Museum of Contemporary
Crafts, New York, New York
1978 "Sites/Paper Making as Art," Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

Bramson's myths are points of departure for each tableau, guiding the arrangement of various images and objects, such as a palette table, small shelves, or group of small doll-chairs. Bramson selected her ten myths from various notes she's made pertaining to art-making like, "The importance of waiting (for a message) (which tell us where I have been)." The phrases guide Bramson's rich visual imagination toward making a particular metaphoric statement. Her belief in the expressive capacity of visual metaphor and the benignancy of art is founded in the earlier ideas of artists like William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Although neither espoused a specific code of symbolism, both maintained, as does Bramson, that an artist's perceptive and creative use of image can reveal previously unexplored attitudes and dilemmas to the benefit of the viewer.

Bramson's set-up for **Myths** bears similarities to the traditional arrangement of the Stations of the Cross. Just as the viewer follows Christ's journey by walking from one image to the next, in **Myths**, we follow Bramson's confrontation with the elements of art-making, becoming involved with the process and actual space of the work as well as sharing in her theatrical and illogical world. Yet we do not enter her world, for her tableaux are constructed in the manner of proscenium stages or window displays. From 1964 to 1966, Bramson was employed as a window designer for a major department store in Chicago. She compares the job to that of a theater director, because it required her to conceive and orchestrate all details of a display scene, from mannequins to lighting. Working with the mannequins prompted Bramson to reconsider the figure (which she had previously abandoned in her art) as an "expressive prototype." One of the displays she vividly remembers was a Christmas window on which the store's design staff collaborated. A group of antique china dolls was situated in a mock tree house. Bramson recalls a frightening moment of recognition while installing the display, when the eerie smiles of the dolls were reflected in similar smiles of children who watched her working. Bramson's fascination with this image of nearly grotesque femininity and naivete is manifested in the work of the mid-1970's in which she assembled disjunctive parts of china dolls and bric-a-brac into subtly macabre sculptures. Later the image was incorporated in the assemblages entitled, **See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil** (1975-1977).

Phyllis Bramson

Still and Not So Still Lives, 1977

Pastel, clay, gouache, and found objects on paper

42" x 48"

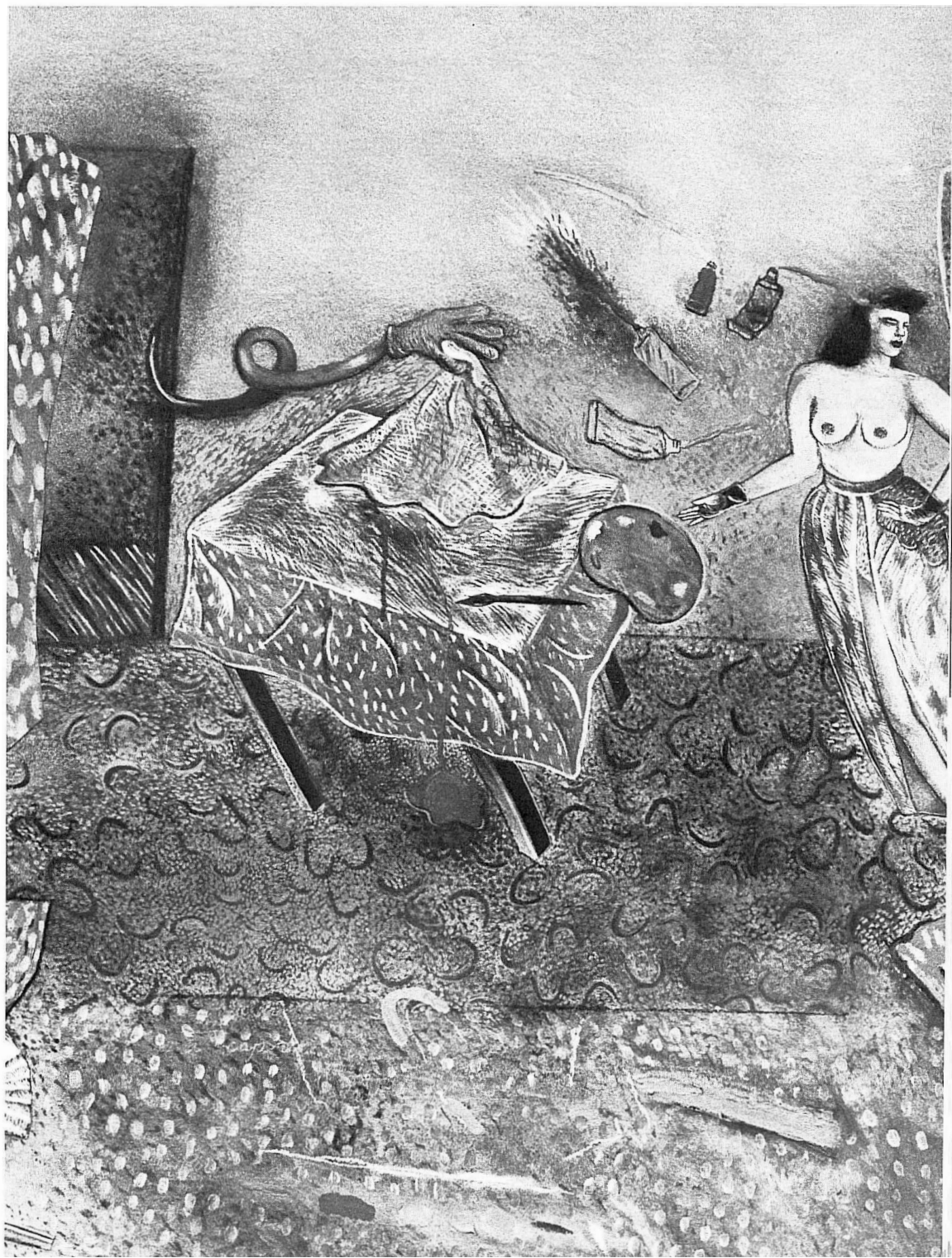
Courtesy of the artist

The intensity of Bramson's current images results from a dramatic conflict, not only between the observer and the observed, but between the qualities of concealing and revealing, action and passivity, grace and clumsiness, and motion and stillness. Bramson recently noted that she likes "to address opposites, such as good/evil, feminine/masculine, light/dark." Although she cannot trace this attraction to dichotomies to a particular source in her background, she asserts that she has always been concerned with the phenomenon of good and evil, "not one or the other but the clash between the two." Generally she feels that her art work is "moralizing," even though the moral is not obvious but metaphoric. The device of the mask, which intensifies and dramatizes as well as conceals emotions is used by her heroines to confront viewers as well as hide from them. For example, in one of the **Still and Not So Still Lives** drawings (1977), a woman stands in the center of an arcade-like stage, rather brashly nude, holding a gigantic mask to cover her upper torso. Bramson's women embody contradictions, being both introverts and extroverts who struggle to maintain a productive balance. In **The Fall of Eve** series (1978), the central figure dances in a low-cut evening dress. Her back to the viewer, she focuses on producing movement a long strand of paint squeezed from a tube. The character's fascination with it causes her to perform for, but not interact with the audience.

Bramson's use of words bridges some of the distance between her private metaphors and the viewer. Since the statements help her focus and delineate the subject of her work, when the work is finished, the statements written on them or on labels are, like mottoes to encourage viewers to orient themselves within her particular world. The statements she has chosen for **Myths** show not only her interest in theater, disguise, and revelation, but also her intention to articulate dilemmas and feelings in the basic visual dichotomies, such as dark/light, flat/round, and inside/outside:

1. The plot is clear when there is pattern.
2. Concealing is revealing (The Great Disguise Theory)
3. The importance of Shading.
4. It is often a murderous thing (but without violence).
5. The dark double (observing the role that I play).
6. Giving relief to the dark side.
7. When images meet in dialogue/a message to myself.
8. Charging up the space/and building walls to keep it out. The two-house conflict/building walls to keep it in.
9. Making things other - the attunement of the opposite.
10. The importance of waiting (for a message) (which tells us where I have been).

Phyllis Bramson
Painter's Conflict/The Conflict, Part III, 1979
Pastel, crayon, and charcoal on paper
29" x 36"
Courtesy of the artist





Phyllis Bramson

Dancing the Black Away, 1979

*Pastel, crayon, and charcoal on paper
40" x 45"*

Courtesy of the artist

The expressive and narrative nature of Bramson's work links it to the Imagists of Chicago, where she has made her home for more than fifteen years. She shares the personal subject matter, sense of surreal occurrence, and interest in kitsch of the imagists, but her works lack their harshness, flatness, and tendency toward abstraction. Though the image of the stage may derive in part from Jim Nutt's use of it, it is equally tied to Degas' pastels of the stage, which explore ephemeral contrasts of dark and light, the richness of theatrical color, and odd perspectives of observation. Bramson acknowledges no specific bond with the Chicago Imagists, but feels a kinship with such artists as June Leaf, Robert Barnes, James McGarell, and Joan Brown in their response to subject matter and sense of craft. However, she cites certain indigenous attitudes toward the image in Chicago, of knowing "how to push an image without becoming illustrational." She describes her own work as, "like Burlesque," a constant stream of spectacle and activity.



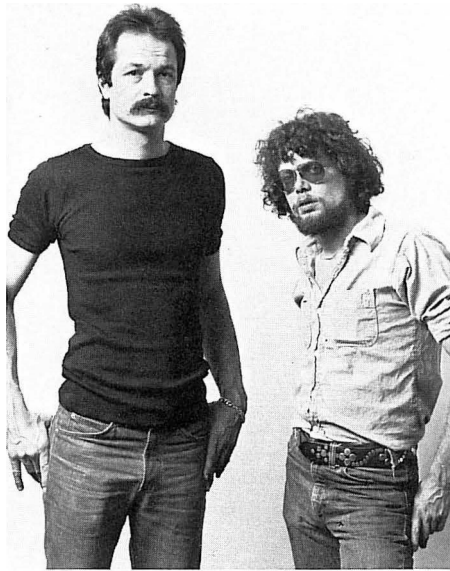
Phyllis Bramson
Fall of Eve, 1978
Pastel, crayon, and charcoal on paper
40" x 45"
Courtesy of the artist

Although the irrationality in her work might be traced to dreams, the manner in which Bramson structures and highlights various aspects of it, corresponds to theater, especially to absurdist theater. Art, Bramson believes, "has some kind of magical property which fascinates, but not necessarily entertains." For her, the compelling power of art is its humanism, in that it exposes emotions, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Her myths are not just tales, but function as purges for herself and, she hopes, the viewer. Her convictions, as well as her intoxication with the theatrical and sensual, enable Bramson to probe the many facets of her own interior dramas.

Susan Logan

1. All quotes by Bramson are taken from a conversation with the author in May, 1979.

Gundersen Clark



Bruce Gundersen and Robert A. Clark's performance work, *Dagar Ane*, is the fruit of a nine-year artistic collaboration. This unique, dual form of communication - the underlying impetus of their work - is one explanation of their work's complicated, elusive nature. The performance involves an intense ritual, incorporating violent symmetrical, body movement and obscure sounds, which takes place in an elaborate architectural set. "The source of their subject matter, whether it concerns the environments or the actions, lies in their personal mythology. A mythology the artists reveal through images, actions, and sounds."¹

Natives of Chicago, Gundersen Clark (their working title) became acquainted as art students in the late 1960s at Northern Illinois University at DeKalb and completed their first piece together in 1970. Both attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and received MFAs in 1972. To date they have completed nearly thirty works. Personal friends emphasize the contrasts in their personalities which totally disappear during the actual presentation of their performances.

At Gundersen Clark's request, no statement is included.

Robert A. Clark born in Chicago, Illinois, 1948. Educated at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois (BFA 1969) and School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois (MFA 1972). Lives in Chicago, Illinois.

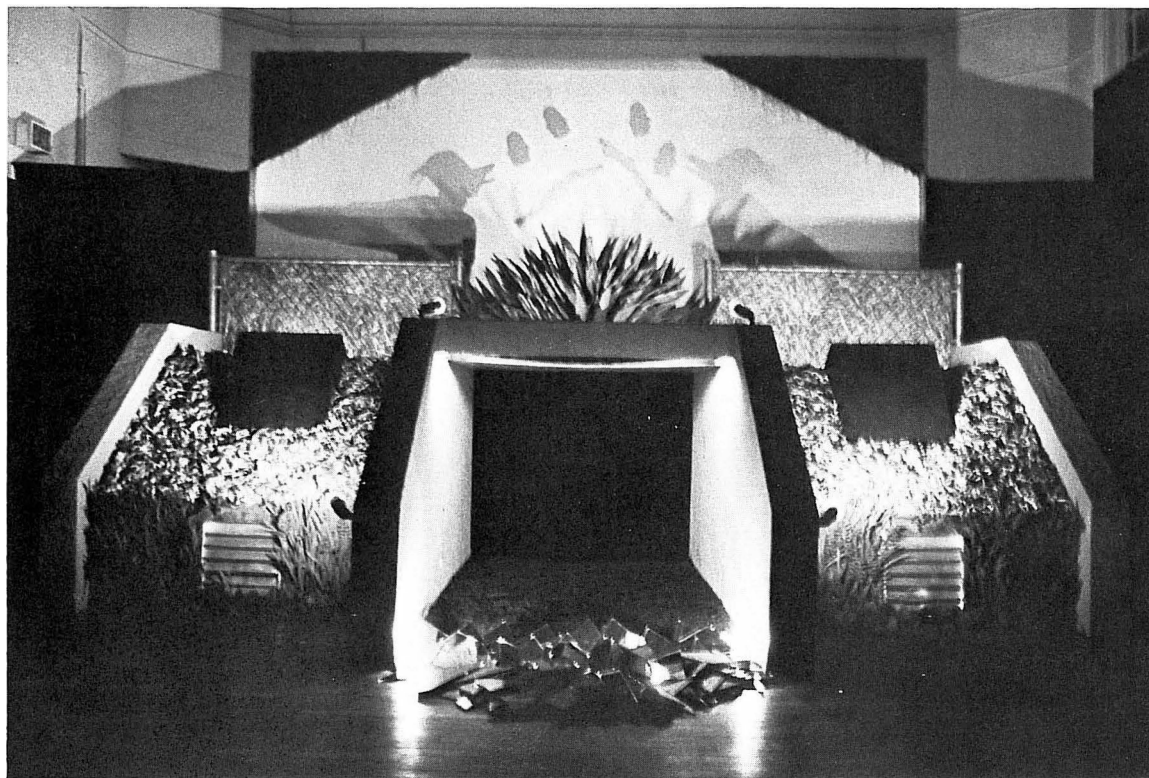
Bruce Gundersen born in Chicago, Illinois, 1947. Educated at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois (BFA 1969) and School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois (MFA 1972). Lives in Chicago, Illinois.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1972 Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
98 Greene Street, New York City, New York
- 1973 Murrey State College, Murrey, Kentucky
- 1974 Name Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1975 Name Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

The idea of artistic collaboration in contemporary society - a society which appears to be devoted to the self, its emphasis on introspection, self-sufficiency and survival - is unique to say the least. Gilbert and George, the English performance duo, is probably the only well known example. However, whereas Gilbert and George have declared themselves "living sculpture" and make no distinction between their everyday activities and their work, Gundersen Clark's performances, though they may contain hidden references, are separated from each of their independent lives.

A video tape of an earlier work, **Rads Clubojer**, performed in 1973, exhibits a colorful multileveled installation - a dimly lit setting of geometrically arranged, thickly textured substances in front of centrally divided tunnels, barriers, fenced platforms, and a final back wall. After a slow sequence of ambiguous noises, the padded, helmeted heads of the performers arise at the rear corners of the set and then vanish. The totally costumed figures then appear at the front tunnel openings on either side. A timed and symmetrical series of half-hidden actions - slow crawling, nuzzling, jerks and quivers in conjunction with erratic breathing, animal and mechanical noises - builds to a high intensity and culminates in a violent spasmodic struggle and a final frantic scaling of the rear wall.



*Gundersen Clark
Dagar Ane, 1977-1979
Mixed media
10' x 12' x 14'
Courtesy of the artists*

1976 Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois
Gallery 1134, Chicago, Illinois
Gallery 1134, Chicago, Illinois
Name Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

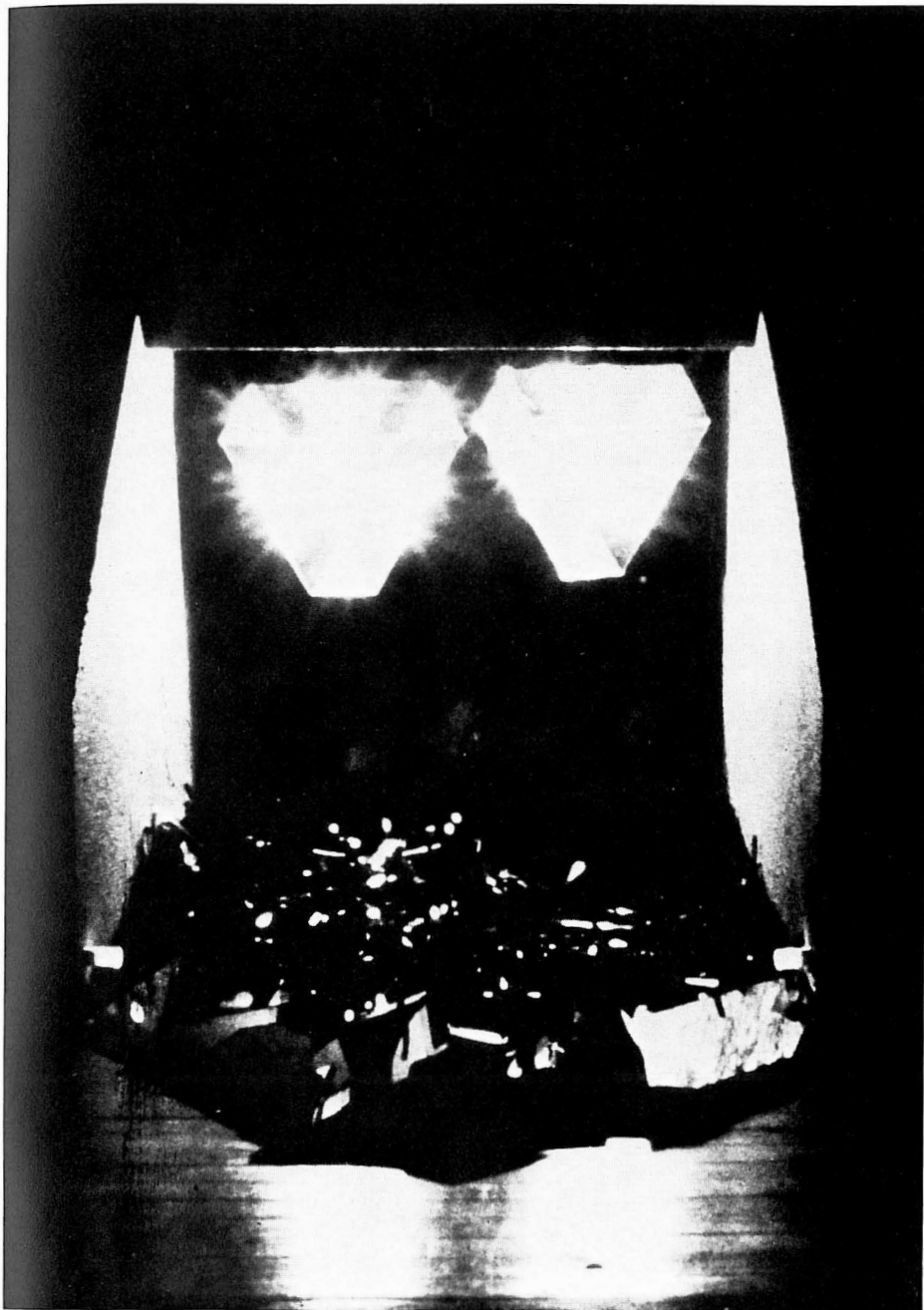
1977 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois
Midway Studios University of Chicago,
Chicago, Illinois
Name Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
Artpark, Lewiston, New York
Lodge Hall Movement Center, Chicago, Illinois
1979 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois

Dagar Ane – a typically cryptic title which the artists adamantly refuse to discuss – is staged on and around an elaborate structure: an intricate, well-crafted, architectural sculpture. Chainlink fence, wood, dirt, broken mirrors, multicolored yarn, plastic greenery, shredded cellophane are the synthetic, base materials of this altar/shrine. It is both stage and set, more than props or background, an integral element of the performance.

Certain elements of the work have historical precedents in early twentieth century performance art. In 1910, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and several painters from around Milan, later known as the Italian Futurists, published the **Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting**. This publication declared that “The gesture for us will no longer be a fixed moment of universal dynamism: it will be decisively the **dynamic sensation** made eternal.”² Thus performance was considered an extension of the activity of painting. Both Gundersen and Clark initially came from painting backgrounds (which may also account for the rich surface textures of the setting.) Likewise, just as the sounds of cannons and machinery inspired Luigi Russolo to write his manifesto on **The Art of Noises** (1913),³ certain of Gundersen Clark’s sounds appear to be mechanically induced, though many are oral or emerge from strange objects or instruments. A similarity in the costumes is also notable, but whereas the sculpted costumes of Futurist, Constructivist, and Dadaist productions were influenced by machine and cubist imagery, Gundersen Clark’s attire (which they design and sew themselves) looks more like uniforms geared toward ambiguity and nonassociation. While the earlier performance movements were in the way of politico-artistic attacks on audience awareness or lack of it with a heavy verbal element, Gundersen Clark’s “assault” is more abstract and has no verbal component.

Currently, several interrelated and overlapping approaches are being explored within the performance idiom. Many artists have concentrated on the body as a means of expressing concepts, as a tool for making art, or as the actual material of art – “living” sculpture. Frequently, the audience is involved in these efforts through an exchange of information concerning social and personal values with the artist or in groups (possibly a legacy of the vogue of encounter and consciousness-raising groups). There has been an emphasis on the personal experiences of the artist and, most important in relation to the work of Gundersen Clark, a concentration on the human physical presence itself in time and space (often through the incorporation of dance elements), and an examination of primitive belief systems with an end to evolving new personal rituals.





Gundersen Clark
Dagar Ane, (detail), 1977-1979
Mixed media
10' x 12' x 14'
Courtesy of the artists



Gundersen Clark

Radma Waad, 1975-1976

Mixed media

Approximately 5' x 20' x 25'

Destroyed

This last tendency contributes to the overall appearance of Gundersen Clark's performance, though their approach and impetus is broader and includes more contemporary factors. The stress on private ritual and mythology, which first emerged in the work of the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s, was partially attributed to the breakdown of traditional belief systems. However, more recent performance "rites," unattached to any actual personal or collective credos are concerned to a greater extent with autobiography, esthetics, and audience psychology. Part of a society continuously bombarded by the media and commercial entertainment, many younger artists since the mid-1970s have incorporated these peripheral life experiences into their work. Gundersen Clark's elaborate costuming, staging, lighting, sound, and live action are dramatic and theatrical and are geared to audience reaction. The artistic process, graphically speaking, involving source, maker, and result, now takes into account "effect," which comes full-circle as a contributing factor to the initial source.

A close friend of the artists, who has seen all of their performances of the last six years, characterizes the work as:

A total mystery... audience expectations are built up to a high tension.... The set is a cleverly constructed little monument ... almost tomb-like in which there are always hidden entrances and exits. The structure is forbidding... sealed off from the audience and dimly lit, a restrained quality... The materials, their surfaces and colors elicit emotion and have the appearance of being concentrated and like industrial structures. The beginning of the performance is signaled by a noise from the interior. There is a series of incomplete, sinister activities... No action has a resolution... like a "black magic" ... funny sometimes.... Reactions vary within the same audience. Long agonizing silences and subhuman noises... sometimes recalls a strange underworld to which this is only the entrance and these activities only a hint of what goes on below. Silence ... tension builds... violent and symmetrical... things crashing and breaking... frightening and exhilarating at the same time... a sudden, always unexpected ending... only a few would venture near the set afterwards⁴

The personal memories of an intangible, unrepeatable life experience are what remain beyond the materiality of the set. Connections and associations, if any, are few and vague, being obliterated by the overall "magic" tone. This "magic" is the dominant characteristic of the performance - an elusive quality reflecting the complexity of the decision-making process - in this case, informed and confounded by the confrontation and amalgamation of two unique individual sensibilities.

Kathleen Thomas

Notes

1. Statement written by the artists, May, 1979.
2. Rosalee Goldberg, **Performance** (New York: Thames and Hudson), 1979, p. 10.
3. **Ibid.**, p. 15.
4. Auste Peciura, from a conversation with the author, May, 1979.



Gundersen Clark
Skid Wa, 1976
Mixed Media
Approximately 6' x 12' x 16'
Destroyed

Story Mann

Story Mann

Possumhead, 1979

Assorted personal effects, photographs, and videotape.

Diorama incorporating acrylic on canvas, natural landscape elements, and 16 millimeter film.

Courtesy of the artist

Finley Fryer

The Cat Band, 1978-79

Mixed media

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Cat Band on Stage, 1978

Assemblage

12" × 30" × 12"

Courtesy of the artist

Performance at the Cat Organ, 1978

Watercolor on paper

22" × 30"

Courtesy of the artist

The Cat Band, 1978

Pencil on paper

18" × 24"

Courtesy of the artist

Finale, 1979

Watercolor on paper

22" × 30"

Courtesy of the artist

Restoring the Cat Band Window, 1979

Assemblage

28" × 20" × 3"

Courtesy of the artist

What Do You Remember When You Were At Your Craziest?, 1979

Pencil on paper

18" × 24"

Courtesy of the artist

David Saunders

Scope, 1979
Installation, mixed media
24' x 24'
Courtesy of the artist

King John, 1978
Plaster replica
12" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

Isabella, 1979
Pastel on paper
48" x 36"
Courtesy of the artist

King Lear, 1978
Plaster replica
24" x 24"
Courtesy of the artist

Lady Macbeth, 1978
Pastel on paper
24" x 36"
Courtesy of the artist

Lady Macbeth, 1979
Plaster replica
48" x 48"
Courtesy of the artist

Phyllis Bramson

Myths of Inspiration, 1979
Installation, mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Myths of Inspiration, 1979
Mixed media on paper
29" x 31"
Courtesy of Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
and Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, New
York

Myths of Inspiration, 1979
Mixed media on paper
29" x 31"
Courtesy of Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
and Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, New
York

Myths of Inspiration, 1979
Mixed media on paper
29" x 31"
Courtesy of Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
and Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, New
York

Gundersen Clark

Dagar Ane, 1977-1979
Mixed media
10' x 12' x 14'
Courtesy of the artists

