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ART; A Mixture of Messages in Three Shows

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

THE three shows at the Aljira center for contemporary art here are "No Easy Walk," a selection of black-and-white photographs by Helen Stummer; "Nourish!," an installation by Stefanie Nagorka, and an anthology by 10 artists titled "On and Off the Wall."

Ms. Stummer may not have taken a vow of poverty, but her view of those stuck with the condition bespeaks an almost religious outlook. Yet, in her statement, the photographer presents herself as a messenger bringing news to suburbanites, whom she likens to generals "insulated from the realities" faced by soldiers at the front.

Doomed though her mission may be, Ms. Stummer persists, concentrating on the children who live in the squalid sections of Newark. Outdoors, her subjects play around derelict buildings and make mud pies on a vacant lot strewn with garbage; indoors, a little girl stands on a chair to fix her hair in a mirror. One boy does the same in order to wash dishes in a sink; another sits, tenderly holding an infant as new and pristine as the furniture is old and stained.

Ms. Stummer does not exhort, neither does she blame, but by eschewing violence and radical chic in favor of children who look clean and cared for, she suggests that the only thing distinguishing them from their suburban counterparts is the dismal setting in which they operate.

As a photographer who has spent about 15 years studying the subject, she ought to know; she must also be aware that the truth she conveys is not the kind to move multitudes, especially not in a "Let them eat cake era." But it would be a callous observer who is not moved by her work and its implications of what Orwell called "common decency."

A Minimalist with a social conscience is an oxymoronic combination, yet it seems to describe Ms. Nagorka. The artist covers the center's brown linoleum floor with 100 galvanized buckets arranged in rows of 10, effecting symmetry that is pleasing and that would be even more so if the lighting were less clinical.

Still, by depositing in each gleaming bucket a plastic bag of powdered milk, Ms. Nagorka changes a Minimalist statement into one with a message about hunger. Ironically or not, she combines the fruits of mass production with the kind of food that is routinely dispatched to the third world.

Though the artist has stated that "Nourish!" is about "nourishment: the conspicuous lack of it," her literal-minded approach to the subject implies a compassion that is equally routine. Samuel Johnson was probably right when he said that nobody ever lost a night's sleep over a war on the other side of the globe.

Richard Bottwin stands out in the group show "On and Off the Wall" with constructions in wood painted or, in the case of the example illustrated, left raw. This piece is a building with walls that would seem improvised were they not precisely cut and their surfaces sanded to a satin finish. Inside the structure is a passage supported by tall right-angle triangles made of one-and-a-half-inch beams. The impression is of a cross between a Melanesian clubhouse on stilts and an early design by the architect Frank Gehry.

Amir Bey contributes life masks cast in bronze and framed by "pancakes" of patterned, glazed ceramic. Robert Blackburn, the printmaker, may be the most prominent subject, but the likenesses that stand out are those of Malachi Favors and Roscoe Mitchell, in which the eyes are drilled or otherwise opened to give more expression.

Having asked herself what it is that she knows, Janet Goldner cuts the question out of steel sheeting and, in

a companion work, lists physical and mental features that have inspired feminist discourse. Gregory Coates produces "shutters" with louvers made of warped wood, metal bands, perished rubber and leather, transforming them with colors that range from black and creosote brown to emerald green.

The dominant painter is Diogenes Ballester, with a large encaustic of a glowering priest who wears a flame-colored cope as if it were a straitjacket. Not to be outdone, however, is Lester Rapaport with two striking works on paper, one of which is a white beehive shape dotted with yellow and laid on a black ground.

Gladys Barker Grauer presents a wall hanging that is a dancing figure with head and feet painted on canvas, body and limbs cut out of corrugated paper and accessories that include a flag and mats woven from colored fabrics.

Nieves Saah is represented by compositions in pastel that suggest figures and objects seen in a distorting mirror, Lynn Seeney by an Abstract Expressionist canvas quartered like the shields in coats-of-arms. Joanne McFarland's monotypes consist of stripes in black and pastel colors that are embellished with collage and touches of metallic paint and that look all the more delicate when viewed from a distance.

All three shows run through March 18. Aljira is at 2 Washington Place and is open Wednesday through Friday from noon to 5 P.M. and Saturday from noon to 4 P.M.