

ART REVIEW

## **Defining a Woman's Place in the World as the Very Center of Life**

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**LINCROFT**— IT DOES not take a count to see that a startling majority of artists exhibiting in New Jersey are women: group shows provide evidence enough of the imbalance, and it is grounds for concern. Should men be restored to the scene as wolves have been to the wild -- forcibly?

Be that as it may, the feminist beat goes on. Witness the exhibitions celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series, which have just begun at Douglass College and will continue at various locations on the Rutgers University campus in New Brunswick through Jan. 13.

Less ambitious but no less significant is "A Woman's Place," at the Monmouth Museum here. Although the title has the ring of a shot fired across the bow of an enemy ship, the show, organized by Ann Williams, is not exactly controversial. Other curators might have tackled political issues; Ms. Williams concentrates on emotional issues. Dorothy V. Morehouse, the museum's president, leads the way by asking in her catalogue foreword, "Can women turn to their female forebears, either real or legendary, as role models?" Ms. Williams, also an artist, responds with a production that says in effect, "And how!" but renders the observer dizzy with its pros and cons.

It is a rare artist and curator who resists the temptation to wear both hats simultaneously, but Ms. Williams has excluded her own work from the lineup. As a former director of the New Jersey Center for the Visual Arts in Summit and, more recently, curator of art at the Morris Museum in Morristown, Ms. Williams brings professional know-how to the task. It shows in her choice of 20 artists, some prominent, others relatively obscure.

But instead of discussing esthetic achievements in her catalogue essay, the curator pores over personal backgrounds -- not in great detail, but enough to suggest that women have

a corner on sensitivity and perhaps suffering, too. She pinpoints Grace Graupe-Pillard and Tatana Kellner, who lost relatives in the Holocaust, and Susan Newmark, who used her work as a means of coming to terms with her mother's death. In her catalogue statement, the painter Emma Amos explains that Vivian Browne, the subject of her canvas "Never, for Vivian," was dying of cancer at the time. Barbara Mauriello, the author of a book that looks like a game, recalls in her statement the doll clothes made by her grandmother and the Hungarian goulash that was her Aunt Cella's specialty.

Admittedly, viewers of contemporary art sometimes need all the verbal help they can get, but this is help bordering on manipulation. For instance, are visitors who are unimpressed by Diana K. Moore's academic figures of women, cast in steel and concrete, supposed to recant upon learning that the sculptor was mourning the recent loss of both parents? Such emphasis on experiences that, after all, are the stuff of life tend to undermine the art rather than enhance it. It should not, however, deter viewers with cool heads and relatively hard hearts. Chances are they will spot the choice items right away, beginning with the quilts of Janet Taylor-Pickett, especially the one that is a compartmented garden in which flowers, foliage and animals fairly sparkle against a background of black and blue. Then comes Ms. Mauriello's book, a well-crafted folder containing cubes that are decorated with heads and details of figures. The paintings seem inspired by Ingres and Delacroix, but the way they are used is reminiscent of the tales Dottie Attie tells with pictures.

ALSO impressive is Margarita Becerra Cano's "Purple Magic," which consists of a corn husk folded to look like a figure, tied at the waist and laid in a shallow box that is covered with paper marbled green and black. This is not an assemblage, but rather a fetish, and one with a presence that may or may not be benign.

Tova Beck-Friedman acknowledges the inspiration of "female archetypal images," but her tall, draped figures, made of paper pulp treated to resemble stone, are androgynous in character and vague in form.

Janet Goldner is a sculptor with a gift for wielding the blow torch, a way with words and the will to combine the two. The results are huge sheet-metal vases with pot bellies,

nipped-in waists, flared tops and skins perforated with aphorisms a la Jenny Holzer. "A woman who is not oppressed on account of her race is a white woman" is one attention-getting example.

"A Woman's Place" is subtitled "Artists' Reflections of Their Culture" -- presumably the culture of the self. I was impressed by its color and gusto, but the overall message made me think of the refrain in the old Peggy Lee number, "Is That All There Is?"