

ART REVIEWS

**Tributaries: An Exhibition, Lee Fleming:
Curator. Ellipse Arts Center, Arlington VA.
January-February 26, 1994.**

CURATING an exhibition is an art. A good eye can make a lot of difference and it is important for the same eye to follow a show through from selection to installation. One of the most difficult sort of shows to mount is the open call juried show. A juror or curator not only must wade through slides which may or may not accurately reflect an artist's work, but as the weeding-out process takes place, the curator must form a unified whole from a diverse, seemingly unrelated group of the most successful entries and then make the show look intentional. It should make a statement, teach and finally, resemble something that the curator might have put together without the jury process.

Tributaries reflects an excellent eye and it is to Lee Fleming's credit that, through her reputation as a critic and curator, she was able to draw some of Washington's best sculptors to this competition. This is one of the finest juried shows that I have seen in recent years in Washington. The work, though quite diverse in materials, style and imagery, works well together. It is an easy show to move through and interesting enough to make me feel frustrated that I was seeing the show on the last day without the possibility of returning to pull more out of it.

When one thinks of sculpture in Washington, one thinks of big spashy public sculpture or large scale monuments. This is a show of small scale pieces and therein lies the strength of the show. Each of the sculptors is working with intensely personal imagery that would be hard to imagine at a larger scale. In another decade, one might even have said that there is a feminine quality to the show.

Elaine Langerman has always been one of my favorite Washington sculptors. I like the idea of big things made small, her quirky imagery and her unusual surfaces.

Elaine Langerman: *The Golden Book & Box*, mixed media

The pieces are dear without being coy and manage to be childlike and complex at the same time. I particularly like her game series with the deChirico-like sinister twists to the images, here represented by *Game Series #3*. While her pieces invite you to play with their toy references, once there you realize serious games are being played.

I prefer Foon Sham's larger free-standing piece, *Wood Scape 1992*, to the small wall pieces. Although less than six feet tall, it has a monumental feel to it and it has more surprises and secret places than the smaller ones. It also seems crafted with more confidence, has a greater sensuality to the surfaces and feels less contrived. Something of Wendy Ross' work reminds me of Martin Puryear, though they are as feminine as his are overtly masculine, with their vessel-like forms and fragile materials. Working with wax, rope and parchment, she creates mysterious forms that seem to allude to religion or ceremonies. With their fetish references and sensuous surfaces, one is drawn to touch them and afraid of the spirits within at the same time.

David Sheldon's *Frieze* and *Tower* were both very strong. These were pieces constructed out of stacked aquariums, some filled with water and others not. All contained found and handmade objects such as wood, mannequin parts and sand-filled cloth. They were lit with aquarium lights and had some opaque walls spaced throughout as visual breaks. He said that he was trying to abate the natural organism growth upon the objects and the glass in some of the aquariums, but I actually preferred them. The growth added a fourth dimension to the pieces and gave them a creepy quality as well. Joseph Cornell's boxes come to mind, but the scale of Sheldon's pieces, with his use of aquariums and aquarium

lighting and the lack of clutter in the "boxes" give the pieces a more contemporary look.

I am glad that Aaron H. Levine has moved away from his more figurative funerary images and colors of a decade ago and into more non-objective forms and vibrant colors. His two years' work in Italy is reflected in the mosaic of the pieces and forms with their colors reminiscent of the frescos of late Pompeii. These pieces are bolder and much more innovative than his earlier work. There is a feeling of ritual or alchemy to all of the pieces in the show, but it was most evident in the work of Rebecca Kamen. The wall pieces, companions to the free-standing sculptures, looked like otherworldly maps. The reliquaries of Theresa Martin are fun. I am glad that they were placed out from the wall because, in the tradition of Medieval altar pieces, their backs are important as well. The pieces allude to social messages, but they weren't strident and didn't club you over the head with their message.

I didn't much care for the materials used by Marc Robarge with their gold leaf, mosaic and the intrusion of electric lights. They seem "slick" in the tradition of tree trunks made into cocktail tables. The surfaces seemed to diminish the integrity of the wood, making the objects seem artificial rather than mystical. Also weak was the installation of Mara Scrupe, which seemed dated with its tangle of wire and plants. There didn't seem to be enough there to justify the space. Perhaps that was the intent or perhaps the plants could not be counted on to grow fuller. I don't understand why a hanging shop light, the sort one might use in a garage work room, was chosen to represent the woman's work. The idea was not clear and didn't seem thoroughly worked out.

One really troubling element in the show was the concept of prizes. I think they tend to cheapen a show and force the gallery-goer to think about which is best or better. I have never been comfortable with the concept of exhibit-as-contest unless the result is a purchase prize discretely given at the end of a show's run.

—MANON CLEARLY



Photo: Joel Breger & Associates

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