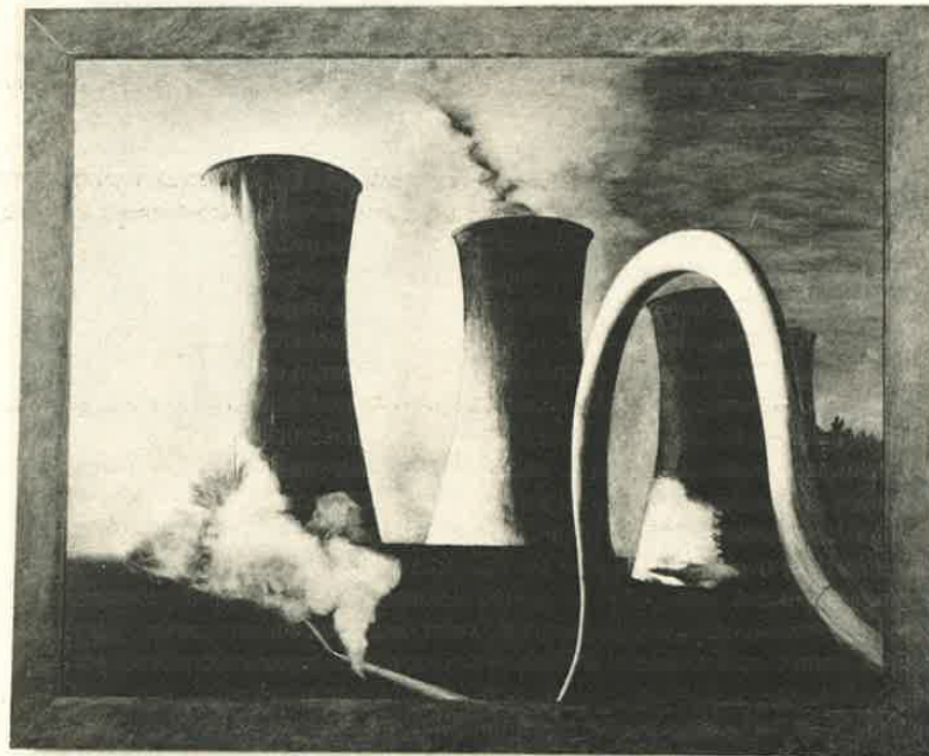


A FASHIONABLE PLURALISM

Oakland / Mark Van Proyen

It seems that in the past few years the only curatorial attention routinely focused on the work of the younger generation of artists (i.e., under forty) in the San Francisco Bay Area is the kind afforded by juried exhibitions such as the annual one Pro Arts has been hosting for the past five years. This kind of exhibition offers a fairly wide selection of diverse works whose relationship to one another is unencumbered by procrustean thematic considerations. On the other hand, with their cluttered, incoherent installations and general lack of thematic focus, such exhibitions make investigating individual works rather difficult, because the only framework available is the tacit assertion that the works shown represent a higher degree of "quality" than other works that didn't make the cut.

The *Pro Arts 1989 Annual* has all of the advantages and problems mentioned above. Thus, it is probably best for any viewer to approach the exhibition naively, picking a few favorites here and a few examples of unfortunate low points there. Yet a closer inspection of the show's totality reveals some ersatz themes that can be viewed as emanating—perhaps subconsciously—from juror Mary Jane Jacobs's selection process. Most immediately noticeable of these is a loosely defined neo-conceptual category in which a group of photographically based works could be lumped. For example, both Shimon Attie and Jeffrey Norman present deceptively simple images enhanced by a textual com-



Steven J. Pon, *Night of the Serpent*, 1987, acrylic on wood and canvas, 41"x 53", at Pro Arts, Oakland. Photo: Wolfgang Dietze.

ponent that seeks to transform commonplace assumptions about the meaning of a form. A similar juxtaposition operates in Steve Briscoe's presentation of obscurely mundane objects juxtaposed with crudely made photographic representations of the same. Using the photographic medium in a somewhat more traditional way (though a nod to the conceptual art of the late 1960s is still evident) is Sara Leith, whose

multiple-image Cibachrome prints regard the landscape as a dreamy memory, and Jan C. Watten whose twin-image self-portrait explores the relationship between self and object. David Vukelich's installation that pays homage to Franz Kafka is another example of the odd uses to which photographic images can be put, but it, like the majority of the other neoconceptualist works, adopts "the conceptual" as simply another

stylistic posture, almost without bothering to come to terms with the ideas needed to make this type of work worthwhile.

The majority of the sculptural works presented tend to go in an anticonceptual direction, with the physicality of materials acting as a foil for the presumed didacticism of the photograph-based work. The most striking examples of this are two pieces by James Cook that look like absurd pretechnological tools whose original purposes have been obscured by time. Sono Osato is represented by one of her typical heapings of goop-covered wood, which functions well as a reminder of the process art that was so frequently exhibited during the early 1970s. Also worthy of a second look are Leonie Guyer's biomorphic orbs with inset spangles and Liza E. Halvorsen's odd aggregate of wall-hung minimalist objects.

To my eye, the most satisfying works in the exhibition are the paintings and drawings by Steven J. Pon and David Tomb. Pon's two landscape-oriented works have a powerful one-two punch of intelligence and emotional provocation as they speak about nature as a place of post-technological desolation. Tomb's tragicomic renditions of an odd-looking male figure absurdly entertaining himself in a lonely room are a tight synthesis of deft drawing and a bravura sense of color. That deft drawing also makes itself felt in a pair of simple graph-on-paper works.

Other paintings in the exhibition seem
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