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In the Choices of Albee, Imagination Prevails

The playwright Edward Albee, who once considered a career in art, has continued to develop his visual sensibilities by studying new work and emerging talent.

From time to time, he uses this experience in the role of guest curator, and his most recent venture, "Sooner or Later: Edward Albee's Eye," is currently on view at the Hillwood Museum on Long Island University's C. W. Post campus in Brookville. The exhibition's title derives from Mr. Albee's belief that, sooner or later, the artists represented are slated for wide recognition.

Fresh imagination does indeed prevail in this assembly of bold painting and sculpture by nine artists with varied backgrounds. One is British, one is Japanese and the seven Americans represent five locales, although most received their education on the East Coast.

All are in their 30's or 40's, have considerable exhibition experience and are obviously well versed in past and present art and art theory.

Although there was no intention to mount an exhibition dealing with a specific theme, the impression is decidedly one of coherence.

As we know from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "Zoo Story," Mr. Albee likes creative work that shakes us up and sharpens awareness.

Power, as his art choices show, can result from awareness being sharpened by a forced focus on a limited number of visual ingredients. These are pared-down abstractions that concentrate attention on qualities of space, design, surface and tone. When the dynamics are right, this proves sufficient for a strong impact.

Much of what is presented here is in the Minimalist tradition, devoid of narrative message and retaining the directness, simplicity and interest in repetitive forms characteristic of the movement's first flourishing in the late 60's. Yet the new work tends to be more personal, urgent and varied, taking its inspiration from a wider range of sources.

Above all, what unifies the exhibition is a certain sense of toughness that comes across in choices of material and color, and in the treatment of surface. These are artists who produce demanding, sometimes aggressive work.

Despite the simplicity of its single, doughnutlike form, Katherine Bradford's "Hunter" is a high-impact painting that exerts a powerful physical effect as it pulls attention into its irregularly angled core and simultaneously outward, via rugged white stripes, to its left and right edges.

Vigorous broken, scratchy strokes energize the canvas and are an example of the roughness that forms a kind of leitmotiv throughout the exhibition. An earth-tone that underscores this roughness also recurs.

Other works of great impact here take part of their strength from the way they blend order and chaos. In the striking "Red Hiker," for example, Farrell Brickhouse emphasizes random markings that have the look of long-abandoned Indian sand painting, yet he gives his painted surface the shape of a formal arch.

The order-chaos contradiction is important, too, in David Hacker's massive painted steel relief, "Remnants of a Derelict Kingdom." Mr. Hacker imposes a sensitive artistic refinement on a seemingly hectic jumble of decaying architectural parts, making the work engaging without destroying its menacing assertiveness.

Recycled, broken, earth-tone surfaces play a role in the toughness of David Ortins's paintings, but here the basic thrust comes from the interaction of one or two black geometric shapes within a compressed space. The gloss of a polished wax surface serves as a jarring anachronism in these small, confident works.

The stark, industrial character of the steel surface in "Drow," Zero Higashida's magnificent wall sculpture, suggests authority, but the real power comes from the way the large, heavy mass undulates and divides.

It is carefully selected color contrasts that divide and help articulate the wooden surfaces of Tad Wiley's effective wall sculpture. Primarily vertical and narrow, they touch on the totemic.

Minimalism's simplicity combines with raw, weathered boards in Douglas Hoagg's right-angle sculpture, "Squared." His more complicated "Spiked Device" is machinelike in such a threatening way that there is no room for the esthetics of form to establish a point. This difficulty is probably intended as a way to encourage uneasiness. An architectural language and blistering, aged, recycled wood are used to structure a strict, repetitive sequence of forms in Frank Schroder's wall constructions. Rationality plays off against the irregular texture in this additional example of art using the order-chaos polarities as valid subject matter.

These extremes occur again in Bobbie Oliver's fine, resonant paintings combining logic and flux. It would seem that artists seeking the visual expression for our time are sensing chaos and order as key characteristics in contemporary life.