

ART

REVIEWS/Helen A. Harrison

When Nature Is the Subject, and the Canvas



Deirdre Brennan for The New York Times

ON VIEW John Hillis Sanders's installation, left, at Southampton College; Alison Moritsugu's oil painting on a log, "Large Catalpa Slice II," right, at the Islip Art Museum; and Marie French's ceramic "Prayer Goddess Icons" at the East End Arts Council.



'The Nature of Things'

Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, (631) 224-5402. Through June 12.

Among this show's eight artists, all of whom use the environment as a point of departure, only Alison Moritsugu expresses a kinship with traditional landscape painting. But notwithstanding her reverence for the Hudson River School, she infuses that aesthetic with contemporary irony.

Ms. Moritsugu's exquisitely detailed renderings of craggy mountains and lush valleys are painted on the end grain of sliced logs, memorializing nature on remnants of itself. She implies that what seems like primeval wilderness is in fact shaped as much by human hands as by natural forces.

Intervention at its most toxic is Darlene Charneco's brief. Her resin-coated models of suburban development are dystopian versions of the American Dream, in which every element, down to the shrubbery, is artificial. The whole environment is in suspended animation — perfectly planned and implemented, but also perfectly sterile.

The harmony of man and nature is chronicled in "El Tiempo de los Ostros," a short, poetic video by Ariadna Capasso and Gonzalo Macias. Shot in the Peruvian Amazon, it makes a correspondence between the rhythmic flow of river water and the pattern of village life.

Nora Aslan's intricate collages explore the dichotomy of order and chaos. Repetition and variation create a lively visual interplay in these large, complex compositions. "Slippery Floor" combines the diamond pattern of mosaic tile with similar patterns on the skins of snakes, juxtaposing the floor's geometric grid with the creatures' sinuous curves.

Josh Dorman uses collage to capture memories, feelings and other transitory

phenomena. Fragments of maps, drawings, notations and vaguely biological and architectural images form a kind of visual diary, but the meaning is so subjective that no clear intention emerges.

'Three Views'

East End Arts Council, 133 East Main Street, Riverhead, (631) 727-0900. Through May 21.

Each of the arts council's three galleries is devoted to an installation tailored to the given space, with varying degrees of success.

In one room, Marie French has grouped scores of ceramic "Prayer Goddess Icons" on stands and around the floor. Visitors are invited to write messages and insert them into the heads of the female figures, none more than a foot tall, which the artist says are based on Mesopotamian precedents.

Considering that Mesopotamia is now known as Iraq, prayers are not unwarranted, although not required. The anonymous nature of the communication encourages frankness. The room has a shrinelike quality, but any somberness is relieved by the charm of the little effigies, patiently waiting to receive the thoughts confided to them.

Clayton Orehek's "Context and Process" is a collection of sculptures in which light is the only unifying element. Ranging from intriguing to amusing to decorative, the installation is more a display of virtuosity than a coherent artistic statement.

Mr. Orehek's centerpiece, and by far the most interesting component of the show, is his "Worktable," a lively jumble of raw material that includes a blender, a pressure cooker, shards of broken glass and other found and fabricated items that go into his works of art. Out of the scrap heap came a

pair of work boots in which the laces have been replaced by neon tubes, a clever allusion to the artist's fusion of work and whimsy.

Alas, not every piece is similarly on target. His intended homage to the poet Sylvia Plath, complete with a corny metaphor of cracked glass and a few lines of doggerel, falls far short of its aim.

The real clunker, however, is unfortunately the largest and most complex in-

stallation. It would be hard — no, impossible — to describe Beth Giacummo's "Wash Your Mouth Out With Soap" without resorting to obvious puns like tasteless and bad taste.

Its purpose, according to the artist, is "to tickle the viewer's spirit," but a room full of ineptly painted pinups, frosted plastic balls and glistening glass "spermies" squirming around a huge pink lamé mouth is more likely to turn the viewer's stomach.

'Grove'

Southampton College, Long Island University, 239 Montauk Highway, Southampton, (631) 287-8234. Through June 30.

This site-specific installation by John Hillis Sanders has 1,300 spades planted in the lawn that borders the highway. Like a stand of commercial timber, the spades are evenly spaced in parallel rows. But unlike saplings, which have the potential to develop into mature trees, these implants are not the harbingers of growth to come. Or are they?

Considering the unresolved issues regarding the future of the Southampton College campus, the installation may be interpreted on two levels. Whatever the artist's intention, the piece simultaneously suggests the possibility of regeneration and destruction.

In positive terms, the spades symbolize the cultivation that results in new growth. Metaphorically, institutions of higher learning are seedbeds for innovative ideas and creative thinking. Seen in that light, the spades represent the intellectual tools available to students.

Even under this favorable reading, however, the arrangement's rigidity and superficial penetration imply that deviation from the norm threatens the structure's integrity. Stay in line. Dig, but not too deep.

Yet an even greater threat shadows the campus itself, a tract of prime real estate with an uncertain outlook as an educational facility. Whatever the ultimate fate of the campus, the spades that stud its front yard are ominous tokens of the potential for development. Mr. Sanders's "Grove" is a timely reminder that the college is in transition.