

ART

Experimentation in Still Lives

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

AS a way of testing their own originality, artists have always liked the challenge of trying new approaches to traditional themes.

"Contemporary Still Life," the season's inaugural exhibition at the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, brings together paintings, graphics, photographs and wall-mounted sculpture by 24 artists in an attempt to demonstrate the range of continuing experimentation in this category of imagery. A number of the participating artists are associated with the East End, but most work in other locales.

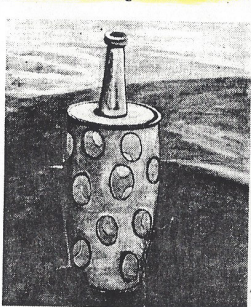
In general, it is a thoughtful presentation that touches many bases and suggests, like much still life of the past, that both the art and objects are there to be decoded. Deeper meanings exist beyond initial impressions.

Some examples are more provocative or more engaging than others, but the differences encourage comparisons and are useful in evaluating ideas as well as effectiveness.

Artists who toy with perceptions tend to stand apart. Richard Baker monumentalizes the weight and scale of pears and apples by making them seem to overwhelm the adjacent silvery landscape, while Francisco Sainz expands the kind of visual information in his floral arrangement by combining flat and three-dimensional details and textures from cut-out re-

flective papers and glossy illustrations.

Other works intrigue because they engage the viewer in multiple levels of meaning. In Carolee Thea's "Narcissus," for example, an antique mirror reflects the observer and re-creates the experience of the legendary figure who admired his face in a body of water. A fish sculpture suspended before the glass refers to both



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"Dominion," an oil on linen by Jim Muehleemann.

the water habitat and the role of the fish as a classical still life symbol.

LI-LAN'S "NIPPON TSU," from her series dealing with postage stamp imagery, is concerned as much with the mechanical markings of the

stamp sheet production process as with the placement and super-enlarged interpretation of the figurative Oriental stamp.

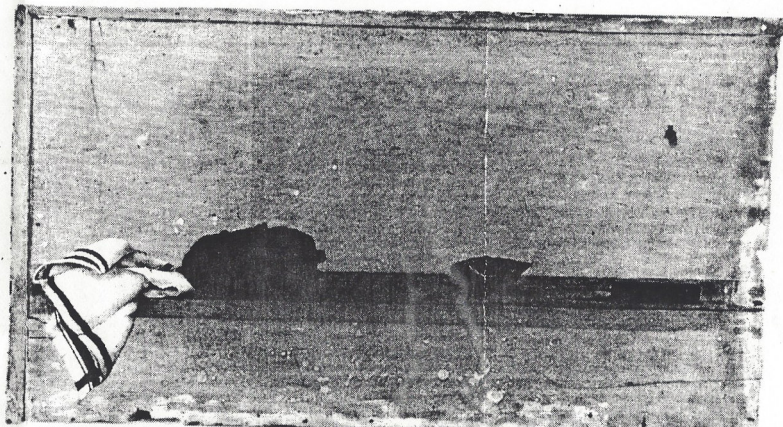
Important, too, is the conceptual dialogue between the paired illusory of a human figure and the flat, weightless postal sheet. A cancellation mark introduces still another level of meaning: both mail and art functioning as forms of communication.

Oriental objects in Warren Brandt's gleaming still life at first seem to be links to the tradition of using exotica. A more-studied analysis, however, suggests that there is also a message of homage here to the design influences that Western artists took from Japanese prints. This handsome painting reinforces Mr. Brandt's reputation as a master of form, color and drapery.

All still life art concentrates on objects and their placement in a certain configuration. A strength of this exhibition is its readiness to present challenges to expectations.

In Thomas McAnulty's bronze relief, a chair and a table each occupies an austere architectural niche. The tabernacle effect suggests the ultimate in both glorifying and isolating an object, and the result is impressive.

Another strength is the exhibition's openness to esthetic standards that differ from those of western industrial societies. The two paintings by Francisco Vidal here are good examples. In the larger one, "Uraba Still Life," bloody knives referring to



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"Pomegranates, Knife and Bee," by Hendrika Ter Elst.

strife between plantation owners and workers trying to unionize in Mr. Vidal's native Colombia introduce a political note.

The exhibition also demonstrates, through the work of Robert Valdes, Jim Muehleemann and Ellen Weider, that the principles of still life also can be applied to invented forms.

Ms. Weider's imaginative drypoint print places fanciful, long-stemmed flowering forms against steps in a way that eliminates any rationale for scale and space, and even even raises the question of whether some of the stems could inexplicably be trunks for magical trees.

Ambiguities also contribute to the visual dynamics of several of the

exhibition's other successful works. A single, continuous brush stroke outlines a wine glass and pitcher in Elizabeth Gourlay's untitled painting, but attention regularly shifts to the charming action of blue, white and gray pigment covering the entire surface.

Hendrika Ter Elst's "Pomegranates, Knife and Bee" sets up a pull between the modernism of its flatly rendered red fruit and aqua background, the antique, primitive character of its aged wood surface and the sophistication of its borrowings from tradition. Each element floats in a mystical isolation.

Certain distinctly contemporary ideas are also well represented in

strong works. Dislocation and appropriation are ingredients in Diane Mayo's effective three-dimensional interpretation of the hypnotic qualities in Morandi's still life paintings.

The expressive gestural strokes characteristic of American mid-century art are recalled in the vigorous charcoal lines of Mercedes Matter's drawing of a dense mass of table top items. Objects lose individuality on the busy surface, but the trade-off is a pulsating, rhythmic vitality.

The exhibition remains on view through May 28. The Center, at 16R Newtown Lane, East Hampton, is open daily, except Tuesday and Wednesday, from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. Sunday hours are 1 to 6 P.M.