

A Transient Art Form With Staying Power

WITH THE SPEED AND glitz of the art world, the need for the installation as a self-contained work of art, in which visitors can be totally immersed, is not likely to diminish. Installations are made for a particular place and time. After their run, they are dismantled. Most are never reassembled. At best, they are at the same time immediate and slow.

In "Elements: Five Installations," the strengths and weaknesses of this art form are clear. The Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center and the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris invited lesser-known artists to turn familiar public spaces into private unfamiliar worlds.

Of the five, only Eric Orr has a national reputation, and he had his first solo show in New York just this fall. Four of the artists — Mineko Grimmer, Ann Hamilton, Orr and Peter Shelton — are based in California, the

The installations at the Whitney satellites turn familiar public spaces into private unfamiliar worlds.

state in which Kathleen Monaghan, the organizer of the show, established her curatorial reputation. Petah Coyne lives in New York. With the exception of Grimmer's "Symposium," all the installations were made for this show.

The title of the show is appropriate. Each work is a meditation upon nature. Orr works with water and fire. Grimmer uses rocks, water and bamboo in a way that suggests the gardens of her native Japan. Coyne uses roots, twigs and earth to conjure up a savage, pitiless yet vulnerable and attentive nature. Hamilton and Shelton are two of many younger artists involved with the volatile relationship between nature and technology.

The exhibition — the most adventurous the Whitney branches have done — is a point of intersection for several artistic directions. Like many influential Los Angeles-based artists, Orr is fascinated by light. Grimmer's installation suggests not only Japanese gardens, but also the music of John Cage, who has been strongly influenced by the Orient. Coyne's very physical work grows out of the intimate dialogue with materials initiated by artists like Eva Hesse and Ana Mendieta. Hamilton is a performance artist whose work suggests the Conceptual installations of Lothar Baumgarten. Shelton builds a dialogue with other sculptors, from John Storrs through Robert Morris, Joel Shapiro and Tony Cragg.

While some of the installations make complete sense, others suggest the kind of problems to which installations are susceptible. For example, Orr's work swings between two sides of Southern California, one polished and materialistic, the other purified and dematerialized, and his installation is too disjunctive to produce an alchemical transformation. Hamilton's installation is stocked with personal and general responses, with the need to express what she feels and the need to make a didactic statement — and the two get in each other's way. Installations are theatrical, and in these works, a theatrical gift is largely absent.

The installations at Philip Morris, (42d Street and Park Avenue, through Feb. 18), are extremely ambitious. Peter Shelton's sculptures are not actually in the exhibition space but in and around entrances and passageways in the huge sculpture court. Some objects are very small, others very large. They hang from the ceiling and lie or stand on the floor. They suggest skyscrapers and acrobats, disposal bins and disposable objects. This is a temporary installation, but it has been built with permanent materials —



Photographs by The New York Times/Don Hogan Charles

At the Whitney Museum's Equitable Center, Petah Coyne's clumps and clots of earth suggest prehistoric rituals.



Eric Orr's sculpture—His work is controlled and contemplative.

cast bronze, iron, steel, concrete and aluminum.

Shelton, who is 36 years old, is one of many artists of his generation involved with the idea of cultural hybrids. In the more than 20 bronze objects scattered on a platform like offerings on temple steps, he has created a persuasive and humorous blend of nature and technology. The objects suggest pipes and fish, crosses and armor, torsos and pails, limbs and bombs. They look like newly created fossils, perhaps to be tossed in the concrete bin nearby; or perhaps they have just been rescued from that bin and laid out — like beams by a construction site, or archaeological finds awaiting classification. The objects seem both wasted and special.

There is wit and bite in Shelton's other objects, too. Just inside one street entrance, the 30-foot-tall, nickel-plated aluminum "Hardstretch" rises like a New York City tower,

but it is also a pair of acrobats preparing to tumble. Alongside is "Droop," a 25-foot-tall bronze suspended from the ceiling and suggesting a cross between a steel carburetor and a sagging strip of felt.

Another pair of sculptures awaits us just inside the other street entrance. "Big Legs" consists of two upright forms like collapsible trouser legs. In "Shoes, Gloves," four small objects sit on the ground like slippers awaiting the tired feet of corporate workers. But the legs are steel and concrete, and the cast-iron slippers look like anvils. The seven parts of the installation suggest the props of a new circus troupe in search of a ringmaster.

Ann Hamilton's installation, filling the museum's temporary exhibition space, is called "The Earth Never Gets Flat." It is an elaborate statement about nature and technology,

labor and leisure, and, in the artist's words, about "man's physical and psychological state within the socio-cultural artifices that dominate life today." It suggests the kind of pretentiousness to which installation artists are prone.

The strength of the piece is its ability to communicate an almost monstrous sense of dysfunction. On the floor are lines like those in an electrocardiogram. Suspended above the lines, parallel to the floor, is a 20-foot ginkgo tree that, according to the artist, will die in the course of the installation because it cannot get the water vibrating — almost throbbing with desire — on the stainless steel autopsy table beneath it. The walls are earth- and blood-colored from a coat of paprika and cayenne pepper.

Parts of this installation are mobile. On a chair, affixed to a wall and ticking like a

Continued on Page 36

ART



Virtuoso work from five artists, courtesy of the Whitney.

By Michael Brenson

Five Artists at Whitney Branches

Continued from Page 33

heart, is a metronome. In one small display case there is a churning animal exercise wheel; in another is a small cutout figure, jerkily jumping in circles. On the other side of the gallery are five pitchforks whose teeth can be scratched into a wall by pulling on a horn suspended like a flush chain. On a ramp of wall furthest from the entrance is a dolly that seems to be waiting to haul all the disparate parts together. There are images and ideas here that do create a sense of different value systems in collision. But the piece is too busy, and the personal urgency that gives the work its life eventually gets lost.

The three installations at the Equitable Center (51st Street and Seventh Avenue, through Jan. 27) work well together. Eric Orr's work is controlled and contemplative. Grimmer invites reflection and generates a sense of disruptive chance. Coyne's effigies push at each other and us, yet manage at the same time to leave each other and us alone.

Orr's installation is oriented around a 10-foot-tall gold column with a continuous stream of water pouring down the front and back. On the walls around the column are two gold-leaf "space delineators," a bit like pilasters, with lines cut vertically through them so that yellow light from the other side of the wall pours through. Alongside the pilasters are gold-leaf-coated panels, hung like paintings, with a thin zip, like a razor slash. Knifing through is hard white light.

Behind the column is a rectangular passage through a wall. Behind that is "Double Vision," a rectangular room with an open window on two sides. The walls and floor inside the room seem to run together so that the space becomes a seamless box of soft, whitish light. For Orr, light is varied, inescapable and as palpable as matter. Although the parts of the work are formally similar, they seem schematic. The installation may work as a series of motifs, but it never comes together as a whole.

On one side of the Orr is Mineko Grimmer's "Symposium," a dialogue between different materials, and between permanence and chance. An ice cone filled with pebbles is suspended over the middle of the room. In the course of the day, the ice melts

and pebbles fall through a gauntlet of bamboo fingers, hitting them, then sliding or skipping off and dropping into a pool. Grimmer studied music, as well as sculpture, and sound matters to her. If the installation suggests a reverence for nature, it also has a sense of nature as something totally other. While the installation seems calm, it beats with a sense of time that functions totally outside human reason. Everything may be meticulously in place, but there is also a sense of irritation, like a dripping faucet or distant coughing in the night.

Petah Coyne's installation is different from the one she made in September for the Sculpture Center, on Manhattan's East Side. Her clumps and clots of earth, wood and straw continue to suggest heads, bodies and fertility goddesses, and they continue to bring to mind images of medieval and prehistoric rituals. Now they also include barbed wire, and each element hangs from the ceiling. In addition, the objects themselves, some like tumors, have grown. For the first time, a sculpture by Coyne has the curving malignance of some of the nightmarish shapes in Picasso's "Dream and Lie of Franco."

The number of objects in this installation — 13 — indicates the role of superstition and magic. Coyne weaves barbed wire around earth like an evil spell, except that the wire turns and spins gently, like dance. Sticks have been planted in mounds like pins in a voodoo doll. The success of the sorcery is apparent in Coyne's ability make her decapitated, malevolent shapes seem curative and whole.

With all the darkness running through this work then, there is a sense of delicacy, festivity, even song. One reason is the pleasure the artist takes in working natural materials and finding a place for them within the "unnatural" space of an exhibition hall or museum. Roots are included in the sculptures, and they provide a sense of rootedness, no matter how much these exposed plots of earth seem to have been ripped out of the ground. Individual parts are also made in relation to each other, so that each part has aspects of the others built into it. Coyne's has invented not only a highly personal church, but her own congregation in which anyone with imagination is welcome.