

ART; ***Big Names in the Recycling Game Coax Poetry From Debris***

By William Zimmer

OBSESSIVE is the word that comes most often to mind while viewing "Discarded" at the Rockland Center for the Arts here. This is a varied exhibition featuring many big names in the recycling game as well as several not so well known. What stands out among all of them is how driven they are to coax poetry out of the unlovable.

On the lawn outside the center are two works by an artist who goes by the single name Kalmia. The sculptures have a ragtag look, being principally made of braided fabric. But they also have a seemingly ritualistic aspect.

Apples, which look as if they belong in this setting but appear nowhere else on the lawn, are heaped in the immediate vicinity of these pieces, and the enlisting of discarded organic nature is bracing.

Inside, Kalmia has two flat mosaic-like pieces called "Coney Island" and "Far Rockaway," which are surely made of embedded detritus from each of the named places.

Some of Ernest Acker-Gherardino's crumpled metal pieces hang outside the center, but the most terse is "Cape," hanging inside. This is a section of rusted corrugated sheet metal that resembles a cloak. In another material, "Tile" is also laconic. It seems to be simply a salvaged section of tiles in the shape of sections of chicken wire.

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Wire supports are important to two other artists. Mattie Berhang furthers the idea of "Drawing in Space" advanced by David Smith, and in a written statement she acknowledges his influence as well as that of Giacometti, Julio Gonzalez and Lucio Fontana. The simple wire grid -- it looks like fencing wire -- acts as a support for a diverse array of incongruous linear objects, all of which further a sense of likeness and suspension.

The other artist exploiting wire is Richard Tuttle, and the publicity advances him as "the most human of the minimalists." Mr. Tuttle has always walked a fine wire, so to speak; sometimes his pieces consist of so little that they seem either to be throwaway items or else they are painted in pastels that give them an aura of preciousness.

In the two pieces on exhibit, both titled "She Re-creates Herself as Spacious" (one is No. 3, the other No. 4), the subtle shift in materials gives the pair a tantalizing presence. One is acrylic on homosote and plywood, the other enamel on wood. Chicken wire is used in both. Whatever the metaphysical implications of Mr. Tuttle's titles, the notion of re-creation is brought strongly home.

The artists so far discussed are characterized by discreetness; other works are thunderous by comparison. My initial reaction was that Judy Pfaff might not belong in this crowd because the mixed media that she uses is too slick, possesses a kind of squeaky newness, which is the opposite of discarded material.

For example, she slices large plastic balls in half and paints them garishly to compose bumptious relief sculpture. Her materials are hung on a support of metal tubing, which is twisted like an amusement park ride. Ms. Pfaff is an expert choreographer; we focus less on the materials than on the sense of movement they create.

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The work of Donald Lipski emphasizes the fact that discarded materials do not have to be down at the heel. One of his pieces is a new version of one of the ideas that brought him renown in the late 1970's: "Gathering Dust." The most ephemeral objects, like rubber bands and broken matches, are hung individually on pins like trophies in a prized butterfly collection. In fact, they are the remnants of our age, which when added up will make a portrait of ourselves.

"Diced Rice" is a piece in Mr. Lipski's newer mode. He now makes solid objects out of the most incongruous materials: here is what looks like an overturned birdbath along with a generous heaping of rice and brightly colored game pieces that are preserved in something like a crystal ball. The components retain their individuality and plausibility but the aggregate is mysterious.

A very intelligent impudence informs the sculptures of David Hammons. "Rubber Dreadlocks" is just that, a braiding of slender black inner tubes. Taken along with another of his pieces, one which uses bottle caps bent so that they resemble cowrie shells, we have both a sincere homage to African culture and an acknowledgment that old values rub against technological or consumer culture.

The steel aggregates, somewhat larger than a fist, which make up Mel Edwards's "Lynch Fragment" series are examples of discarded elements that come together to state a political point. Each piece is like a Station of the Cross in that each reads like an emblem of the precariousness of life in America for blacks.

The political points scored by Mierle Laderman Ukeles are more wide ranging. This artist has been allied with the New York City Sanitation Department in conceptual works that explored the body politic through their attitude toward sanitation. In recent years,

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tangible works have come out of this alliance, including four "Briquettes" made of compressed aluminum cans that would make lustrous-looking ottomans.

The show-stopper is a bed of muck gleaned from subway train wheels. One feels that this ooze might be as primal as anything gets but also that it could sprout new life.

Allan Wexler has attempted to "repair an office so that it looks more interesting than the original," and his conference table looks as if it has seen several mergers, buyouts and bankruptcies, but it is always poised for another deal. Mr. Wexler's "Four Shirt Collars Sewn Into a Tablecloth" fulfils his wish: it's more interesting than either a mere tablecloth or four dress shirts.

The most poignant piece is the group of small houses, the "Barrio de los Artistas," envisioned by Bob Smith, who died last year. Like gingerbread houses, these dwellings are festive, but the sensation comes not from decorations in icing but from their being studded with wine corks.

There are photographs of artist friends, like the late Keith Haring, on the houses, and the corks are testaments not only to sorrow -- the analogy between wine and blood is an ancient one -- but to headiness. In Mr. Smith's barrio, there were many nights of serious drinking.

The exhibition continues through Nov. 15. For information, call 358-0877.