

Hang the Mavericks

Suspended on Chapman Walls, 'First' Works Are Irreverent Attempt to Depose Curators

We've heard the lament over and over. What will happen to forward-looking artists in this sad climate of tightened institutional budgets, gallery closings and curatorial timidity?

But lack of money doesn't have to mean powerlessness. The Los Angeles artists who banded together to found Project X have come up with a solution that bypasses the need to bow to a curator's agenda or beg a foundation for cash.

In a maverick exhibition, "The First Show"—through Nov. 25 at Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University in Orange—six like-minded artists offer examples of their own work that

purport to raise questions about value, style, craftsmanship and interpretation in art.

Aided by Wendy Salmond—an assistant professor of art at Chapman, who wrote the catalogue introduction—the artists devised their own free newsprint handout containing relevant (or possibly slyly irrelevant) information, illustrational material and documentation of the show.

The move smacks of a cheerfully subversive plot to take control of art-world rituals typically performed by anyone but artists themselves.

To underline their bravado (and to further their analytical view of the art world), "The First Show" catalogue includes copies of acknowledgments and other material from the other "First Show" (at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1983), but with all the proper names—of donors, collectors, museum personnel, artists and catalogue photographers—X'd out.

In a way, it's a puzzling gimmick (Why cross out the names of artists too?), but presumably the point is that it's time to take another look at the whole ponderous business surrounding the production of art. Artists have been doing this on an individual basis for years, of course, but it's hard to recall a similar show organized in this seat-of-the-pants fashion.

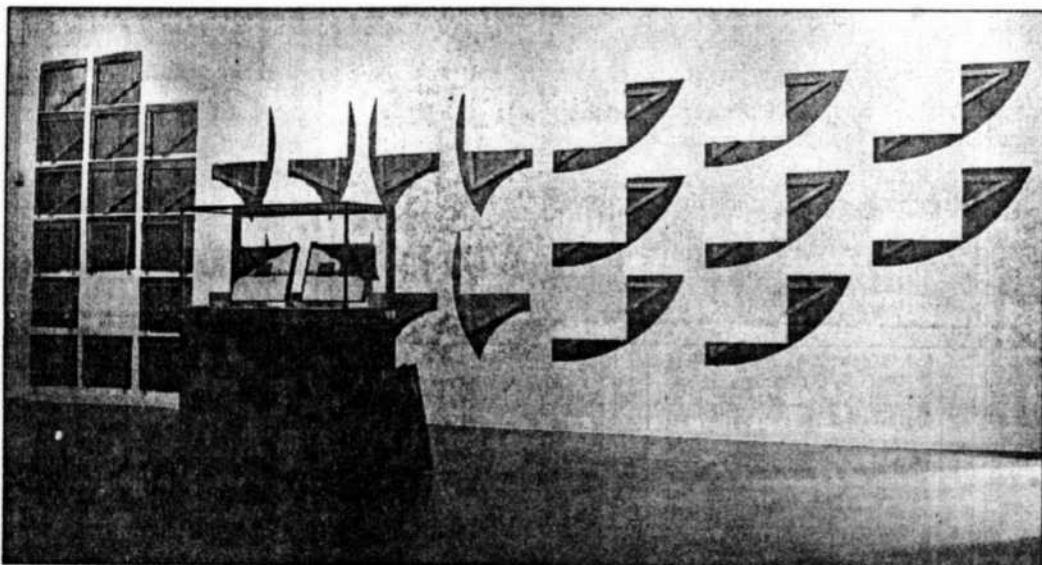
None of this work is particularly easy to grasp, but Theresa Pendlebury's handiercrafts installation, "Beauty and Value Affordably Priced. The Macaroni Works," offers the most clear-cut path into the maze.

Her installation consists of macaroni-covered objects exhibited, in crafts-show style, on a series of simple block pedestals. Gold-covered cardboard boxes are encrusted with pasta-shell designs. An artist's palette holds nests of fettuccine instead of blobs of paint. "Flowers" made of spaghetti "stems" with pasta "petals" are stuck in a gold-painted beer bottle.

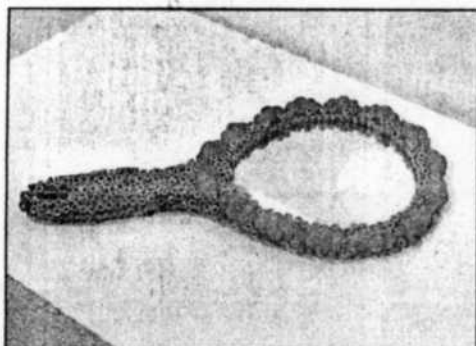
A wry testament to the combination of manic attention to detail, narrowly defined notions of taste and limited imagination typical of many crafts projects, the piece is the embodiment of the conventional notion of art, a veneer applied to life to make it prettier. If anyone needed a demonstration of the notion of "useless ornament," this is it. Yet the piece also is imbued with the poignant, if misplaced, yearning of the hobbyist to transform raw materials into objects of beauty.

Along with most of the other works in the show, the piece also has an anthropological dimension. Members of virtually every human culture decorate useful objects with designs or imagery they consider particularly meaningful. The notion of using foodstuffs as ornaments, however, suggests a culture that can well afford the waste and doesn't particularly care about the impermanence of its creations.

Stephen Berens' contribution pertains to the wryly navel-gazing subject of his own artistic output in 1982. His installation includes a wall-filling display of rows of geometric carved wood framing supports, three of his



Stephen Berens' works, above, comment on his unsold output. Theresa Pendlebury's pasta pieces are easiest to grasp.



own small framed photographic works and his correspondence with two museums. A third element—an exhaustive but ultimately meaningless series of graphs relating to his artistic output in the 1980s—is printed in the catalogue.

All these items have to do with the way artistic achievement is crassly or irrelevantly measured by a relentlessly statistic-devouring and status-hungry society.

Berens deliberately permits no glimpses of his art, the better to throw the spotlight on art-world window-dressing. Despite being professionally mounted for display and supplied with the type of velvet drape used for displaying ultra-light-sensitive photographs, his work is shrouded by glassine envelopes covered with notations.

Two sets of fanned-out correspondence with the museums that bought the invisible photographs permit us to compare the rather fawning tone of personal letters from the assistant director of the Museum of Fine Art in St. Petersburg, Fla. with the staccato flavor of official communiqués from the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Berens' wall-spanning grid of repetitively carved pieces of plywood—which look like minimal sculptures—are merely place-markers for his unsold output from 1982. (The missing work supposedly is tucked into a slim black portfolio resting on the floor.) The title of the wooden pieces sounds like a law of physics ("Reiman's Curved Space")—as if in hopes of gaining greater legitimacy by referring to a more exact field of endeavor.

Erik Otsea and Jan Tumlir began collaborating in 1988 on a painting they subsequently photographed—and reworked and photographed many more times. The painting is not for sale. It's only the vehicle for an ongoing experiment in tracking the commodity status of art.

The seven individually titled color photographs in the

exhibit show several permutations of this abstract painting (a conglomeration of various '50s- and '60s-era styles) as a prop in a variety of locations.

It appears on a white wall in an upscale apartment ("Belmondo"); on top of a compact car ("Old Christ"); being loaded into a truck ("Cave Painting"); propped against an iron security gate ("Ancient Wear"); balanced precariously on a table in a messy room ("Poetic Mode"); in a thrift shop, along with a kitschy lamp, a troll doll, an old evening dress and other items ("Curiouser"); and leaning against a door in the Guggenheim Gallery itself ("Ex Parade").

Each location (and each ironic title) conjures up a different social context for the painting. The canvas on the top of the car suggests the means a struggling artist would use to move his work from the studio to a cooperative gallery. The truck might be part of an art-shipping service, hired by a museum or an established gallery.

Hung in a moderately well-heeled apartment, the painting becomes a middle-class trophy. Found in a thrift shop, it is revealed as a memento of a particular outré moment of culture, hardly different from the lamp base in the shape of a peasant girl holding a soup bowl.

In "A Pride of Panthers," Ellen Birrell (whose other recent work in this vein was shown several months ago at the Muckenthaler Cultural Center in Fullerton) has tailored her inventive portmanteau clichés and series of "found" photographs to reflect aspects of campus life.

Based on the Chapman mascot, the piece juxtaposes images from old yearbooks, advertisements and other sources with phrases incorporating cat references: "He promised me we'd take the lion's share, but I found out that there is more than one way to skin a cat. . . . Remember what they said about curiosity when you're in the cat house. . . . Is that a panther on a hot tin roof or just a paper tiger doing a slow burn?"

Coupled with the phrases, the photographs—which include athletic teams, co-ed cheesecake shots and classroom scenes—suggest tensions between the sexes, or between students and authority figures, which might be percolating beneath the placid surface of long-ago campus life. But that's just one reading. Birrell's juxtapositions of words and images throw a heavy burden of interpretation on viewers, virtually obliging them to construct their own work of art.

Jorge Pardo's piece is surely the strangest in the show. "The Underside of a Kitchen Counter in South Pasadena" consists of a dangling ceiling fixture beaming light on display platforms holding a bizarre yellow radio shaped like a two-headed phone, a blue nylon strap and a yellow glazed bowl about to fall off the edge.

Pardo's other works have involved domestic objects altered to make them useless or menacing—or showcased in frank imitation of commercial-display methods. (In the catalogue for this show, Pardo contributes a large photograph of a store window in which modish steel-and-leather chairs are displayed in front of elegant "portraits" of the chairs hanging on the wall.)

Perhaps the idea here is that display-window artifice and everyday reality have become two sides of the same coin. In pursuit of novelty, the world of artifice increasingly has borrowed from the "accidental" look of real life, while the appearance of everyday objects has become increasingly fanciful and remote from their actual uses.

■ "The First Show," by artists from Project X, continues through Nov. 25 at the Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, 333 N. Glassell St., Orange. Hours are 1 to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Free. (714) 997-6729.