

The Corcoran's Adventurous New Biennial

ART, From B1

all the hybrids in between. The definition of "painting" has become more and more elusive.

The problem for the Corcoran, with its long tradition of biennial exhibitions of contemporary American painting, is that the shows are supposed to keep the public up to date on the state of American painting—but only painting.

Since 1967, when the "painting is dead" controversy first swamped the biennial, Corcoran directors and curators have groped for ways to breathe life into what seemed, on and off, a dying idea. A boring series of regional shows was followed by shows that abandoned the traditional search for new talent in favor of famous contemporary masters. More often than not, the exhibits fizzled.

When Sultan took over as Corcoran contemporary curator in 1988, she decided to resume the format of a nationwide search for lesser-known talent. And, based on her studio visits to artists around the country, she proposed a trio of shows, each focusing on what she perceived to be a significant slice of current painting in the United States.

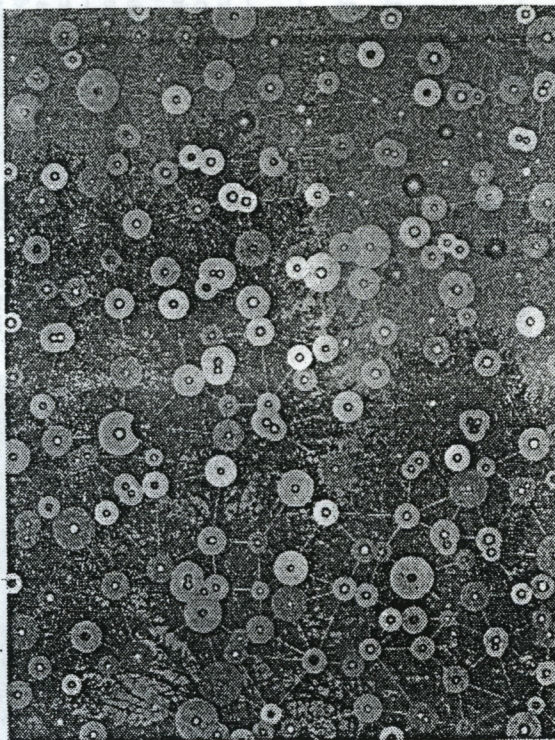
Her first biennial, in 1991, focused on abstraction; the second on the return of figurative painting. Now this.

It is on the way up the grand staircase to the main galleries that the two themes that unite this show—unorthodox materials and art about art—announce themselves in a odd-ball work by James Hyde. It is three huge chunks of Styrofoam, hung high on the wall, like fragments of an old building. Each is painted on one side in a different primary color, but in the classical fresco technique. Somehow, if you give these clunky objects a second look, the fragmented shapes and parched, matte colors combine to suggest fragments from some ancient Roman fresco.

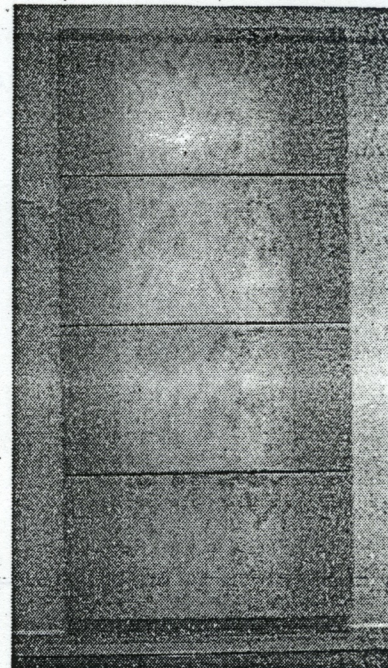
Transformation of another sort is always on the mind of fool-the-eye master Richard Artschwager, the most famous of the sculptor-painters in this show, and the most polished. Three of his zany recent corner pieces (they hang flat on the wall, but turn the corner) dominate the main gallery. Most ambitious is "Splatter Piano," which looks at first like a cut-out Braque abstraction but turns out to be a splayed baby grand, observed from many sides at once. Typical of his work, Artschwager's flattened piano has a collaged surface made from areas of light and dark wood-grained Formica that looks like real wood but isn't. To further confound and delight us, this illusionist then adds adjoining areas of real wood veneer, painted to look fake.

Styrofoam and Formica are the most ordinary materials here. There are rarer ones. Peter Hopkins uses medical fluids, iridescent holographic foil and a partially unstopped bottle of perfume to create his vaguely carnal "Capital Project: Perfume Site #C3," the only work in the show with an aromatic dimension. Merrill Wagner paints a few broad stripes of Rustoleum on large sheets of steel, which then weather into deep, rich bands of gray and purplish black.

Fred Tomaselli's "Green on Red" is a striking geometric abstraction—a tall green rectangle enclosed in a wide,



PHOTOS BY MARY LOU FOY—THE WASHINGTON POST



Fred Tomaselli used multihued pills to create "Blue Circles," left. Above, Heather Hutchison's "Penis Envy," made of beeswax and pigment on Plexiglas boxes.

bright red border. But come close, and the center turns into a lyrical design made from an overlay of marijuana leaves sealed in clear acrylic resin. Two other works are made with pills, which the artist says refer to the chemical dependency of our society. Whatever. They are sensuously beautiful compositions. In "Blue Circles," varicolored, over-the-counter pills from Nuprin to Dimetapp to Tylenol have been embedded at various depths in acrylic resin, circled in paint and then connected as if they were stars in constellations seen through trees.

Some of the most elegant works here are more minimal and more concerned with finding new ways to explore traditional painterly concerns—color, light, space. Stuart Arends makes 50-pound, wall-mounted cubes of sliced steel in delicious colors—they seem to levitate.

Heather Hutchison, who has made the show's tallest and most imposing work, titled "Penis Envy," has used beeswax and pigment on Plexiglas boxes, set out from the wall to create milky white, Rothko-like veils. Leslie Wayne is more traditional—she uses thick layers of oil paint on small wood panels. But the way that she peels back the skin of these dynamic little paintings, or makes them bulge and nearly burst as if they were alive, is surely painting reinvented. Nearby, Robin Rose's eloquently hued excavations of richly textured encaustic surfaces hold their own.

One of the highlights is an installation of painted wooden columns by John Torreano, half-rounds studded with fake gems and gold balls, designed to gently mock the staid formality of the atrium's grand limestone columns. Each column has its own title, which reflects a different mood. Can they really be called paintings? The answer has to be no.

Why not just junk the biennial rules?

The idea was to be as subversive as we could while staying within the definition of the biennial," says Jack Cowart, the Corcoran's deputy director and chief curator. "We don't want to extend it anymore. I think there's an interesting tension created by adhering to our forefathers' rules." He noted that the much-despised Whitney Biennials in New York, the oft-trashed Venice Biennales and the largely unnoticed Carnegie International Exhibitions in Pittsburgh are all broad surveys that have fared no better than the Corcoran's, despite their all-inclusive view.

"We're trying to unlimit a limitation by working inside painting," says Cowart.

This show has its clinkers, bores and even some total irrelevancies. What on Earth are Jessica Stockholder's messy assemblages doing here with their old furniture, clothing and frags? But there's always something else, not far away, that can be brought to life by merely reading the label—not just for a title, but for an explanation of the materials.

There is a large catalogue, but be warned: The entries on individual artists, intended to provide "in-depth insight," are often mired in the incomprehensible art jargon that has been a hallmark of Corcoran publications on contemporary art. If the Corcoran aspires to reach a wide audience, it should start by outlawing all future use of the words conjoin, conflate, referential, reductive, allusive, transgressive and opacity.

The 44th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting will continue through Feb. 19. The Corcoran is one of the few museums that remain open despite the government shutdown. Regular hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Monday, and Thursday till 9. As long as government museums remain closed, the Corcoran will also remain open on Tuesday, when it is customarily closed.

Art

PAINTING OUTSIDE THE LINES

*Corcoran's Biennial Show
Leaves the Canvas Behind*

By Jo Ann Lewis
Special to the Washington Post

The third of Terrie Sultan's Corcoran Biennials, titled "Painting Outside Painting," is the freshest, most relaxed and approachable biennial in years.

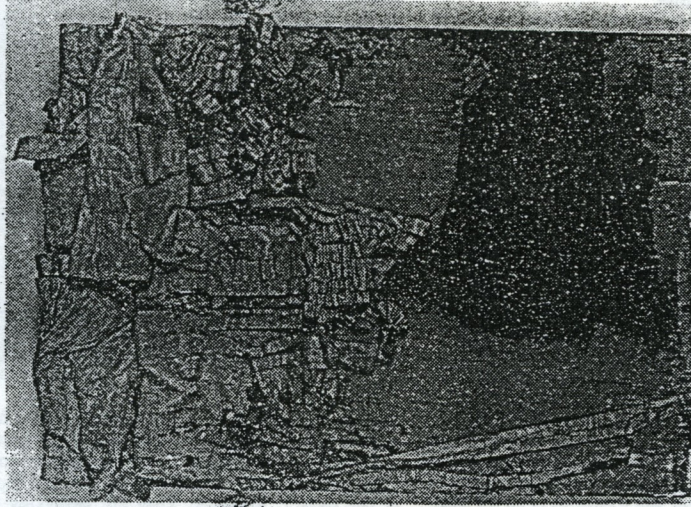
At last, the curatorial eye—like art itself—has been allowed to stray from purely painterly precincts into a more adventurous, experimental realm. She bent the rules, or—as she puts it—expanded the definition of a show that for 88 years has been for painting only. How she picked this particular group of 80 works by 26 artists is hard to figure, since there is little here that most people would call painting at all.

Since Jackson Pollock abandoned the brush stroke half a century ago, the most adventurous and often the best American painters have struggled to escape other strictures in the manner, say, of Sam Gilliam, who first suspended swaths of color-soaked canvas across vast architectural spaces.

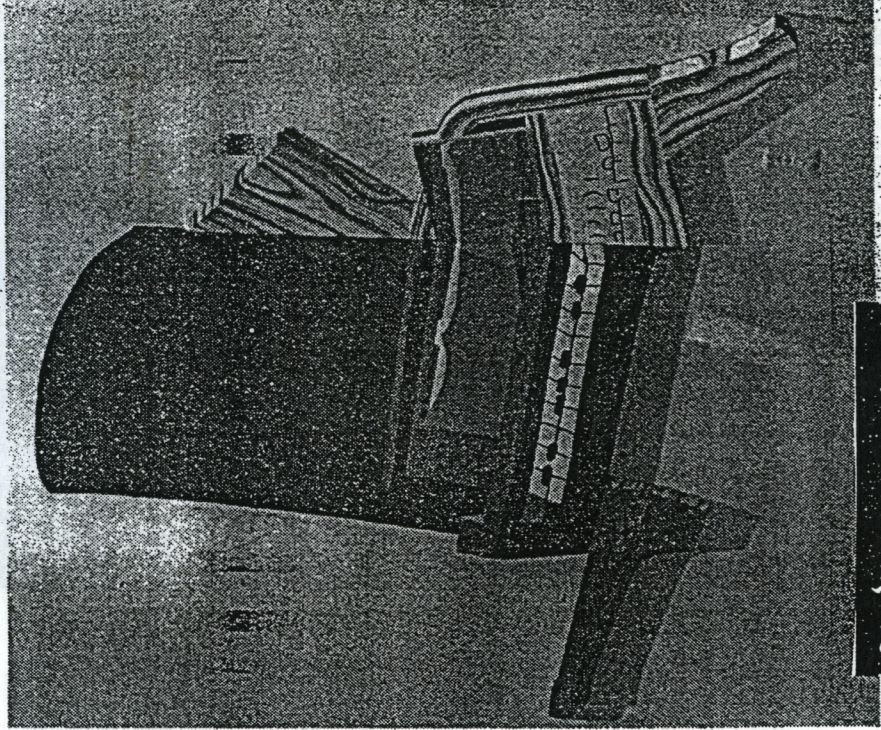
As it happens, free-floating color in the form of Gilliam's huge swags of color-stained tobacco cloth, hanging high above the atrium, is the first thing visitors see. And while it adds little to this Washington artist's credentials (the tackiness of the cheese-cloth-like material has not been transcended), it appropriately reasserts his historic role in liberating canvas from the wall.

As this show of work from the last two years demonstrates, painters continue to explore, as they have for a half century, three dimensions, new materials and new formats: shaped canvases, assemblages, installation art, free-standing sculpture and

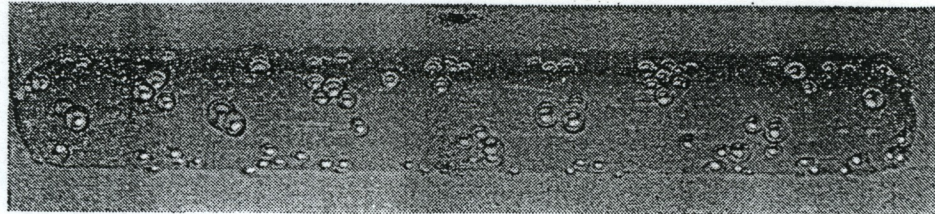
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COURTESY OF LESLIE WAYNE AND JACK SHUMAN GALLERY
Richard Artschwager's "Splatter Piano," left, turns the corner into a world of illusion. Leslie Wayne peels back the paint in her small but dynamic "Raucous."



PHOTOS BY MARY LOU FOY—THE WASHINGTON POST



John Torreano's "Rococo View," a half-round wooden column studded with gold balls, defies logic to be called a "painting."

The Washington Post