Focus on Assaults Against the Land

By HOLLAND COTTER

The 19th-century tradition of using the landscape as a vehicle for social commentary has had few takers among contemporary artists. Neil Jenney (born in 1940) is one of them, and six of his subtly, intricately executed paintings have been brought together as part of the Collection in Context series at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Organized by Elizabeth Semmel, the show leaves no doubt that Mr. Jenney is an artist overdue for reassessment, but it also suggests why he remains a marginal figure.

His debt to earlier American art is obvious at a glance. His reiterative images of blasted trees and sunlit fields, for example, were standard Hudson River School emblems of decay and renewal, fraught with allegorical implications. Mr. Jenney acknowledges the symbolic nature of his own paintings: the darting, piercing titles directly onto the frames. The frames themselves — thick, shellac-tinted — recall the prominent jamblike structures used by Frederick Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt to turn their landscape paintings into near-spectacles.

In these, Mr. Jenney adds a contemporary twist. In contrast to Church's confident, confident sweep of the landscape, Mr. Jenney's view of nature is often narrowly focused and radically cropped. In the small, horizontal "Acid Story," the trunk of a dead tree is cut off in closeup, as if viewed through the gun sight of a tank. Similar implications of conflict mark the two paintings titled "America Divided." In one, a strand of barbed wire stretching across the center of the picture separates the viewer from the darkening sky beyond. In the other, a rusted spike lies abandoned in blood-stained earth, like the evidence of a recent killing.

In all of these paintings, however, which date from 1978 to 1983, the real victim of the destruction of American life is the nation itself. "Venus From North America" seems at

Old metaphors are adapted into a new environmental message.

first glance to offer a note of hope. While its ostensible subject is the Evening Star faintly visible high in the dusky sky, details of the landscape below — the breast-and-buttock-shaped mountains and a single, anatomically curving branch — suggest the pervasive presence of the goddess Venus. A second look, however, reveals the hills to be a sea, infernal gray while the branch emerges, leafless, from a fallen tree in an all but inorganic world.

For better and for worse, a similar mordant sense characterizes Mr. Jenney's paintings as a whole, making them easy to admire but hard to like. They are, after all, highly synthesized creations, laboriously patched together at least in part from the symbolic codes and formal paraphernalia of another time. The faint whiff of mock-academicism that such self-consciousness produces will probably keep them sidelined from mainstream appreciation for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, their attentive remapping of earlier models is what makes them moving. The landscape paintings of earlier American were also mechanical contrivances meant to speak to their time. Thomas Cole's romantic views of the Catskills were cautionary tracts on nature, and the micro Johnson Headle's series of moody depictions of coastal boulders dating from the 1860's can be read as a pictorial fever chart of the era. The Civil War: "America Divided." (Several of Headle's landscapes are currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see page 32.) Mr. Jenney has managed to adapt these older metaphorical conventions without demeaning them and has extended them into — among other things — a complex environmental message for our own time. With their faintly visible, sun-drenched, sun-kissed, sun-blasted images, they are closer to being monuments than paintings, a kind of sculptural post-nuclear Luminism. Like those 19th-century American painting movements, they have their limits, but they constitute a remarkable accomplishment just the same.

"Collection in Context — Neil Jenney: Acid Story" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, through Dec. 12.

MUSIC REVIEW

An Opera for Soloists, Who Click and Whirr

BY NICHOLAS LEGGOTT

"Metamorphosis," the second opera by the Swiss composer Heinz Werner Rust, is not an opera for soloists, who click and whirr, but rather an opera for soloists, who sing and act. The opera is about a group of people who are transformed into animals, and the transformation is accomplished through the use of various mechanical devices. The story is told through a series of scenes, each of which is accompanied by a different kind of music. The music is designed to evoke the mood of each scene, and it is often quite complex and dissonant. The opera is highly experimental, and it is not for everyone. However, it is a work of great originality and creativity, and it is well worth seeing if you are interested in modern music.