

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 9, 1993

Gorky's Influences on a 40-Year Career And 5 Concerned With Current Topics

By HELEN A. HARRISON

"Making Art as If the World Mattered"

Discovery Gallery, 3 Brewster Street, Glen
Cove. Tuesday through Saturday noon
to 4 P.M.

Each of the five artists in this group show deals with an issue that has significance beyond the strictly personal, reflecting the current trend toward art that deals with social, political and cultural topics.

Nevertheless, in spite of a subject's worthiness and the undoubted sincerity of the artist in addressing it, the result has to succeed on esthetic terms if it is to communicate effectively. Not everyone here lives up to that expectation.

One who does is Chris Coffin, whose impressive installation is in the front gallery. The piece comprises a group of catering-size pickle jars in which material collected from various Long Island beaches is preserved.

These reliquaries, carefully sealed and date-stamped, contain evidence of man's negative impact on the environment, but they are more than haphazard records of pollution. Carefully arranged and catalogued, they are at once clinical and suggestive, as when audio tape, which often defaces roadsides, parks and shores, is presented not only as litter, but also as documentation of the elements into which it intrudes.

Joyce Parcher and Marjorie Small deal with the dehumanizing effects of poverty, hunger and homelessness. Both painters use technical crudeness as a metaphor of the raw, sometimes brutal circumstances that they depict, but neither rises above that device to force new awareness or heightened involvement on the viewer's part.

Ms. Parcher tries to ennoble her figures with golden auras suggesting saintliness, a tired device of dubious validity. Ms. Small's approach is less pretentious but equally preachy, using a messy montage technique to hammer home the injustices visited on the urban poor.

Even more shrill are Rita DiGia's indictments of the modern yet ageless war machine, as demonstrated in the Persian Gulf war. Once again, the pale horse of death is trotted out and put through its grim paces against a backdrop of blazing ruins, wounded refugees and smart bombs. We hardly need Ms. DiGia's tear-stained sloganeering to remind us that war is hell.

The central issue is more subjective in Ann Bragg's flamboyant paintings. They deal with psychological rather than actual warfare, symbolized by a prototypical aging matriarch and her manipulative behavior. A poisonous grotesque, this gorgon knows how to get her way, but her victory is Pyrrhic, for in gaining dominance she loses dignity.