

ABSTRACTION WITH A RELAXED AIR

BY DAVID L. SHIREY

HEMPSTEAD ABSTRACT art may not be so popular nor so prevalent as realism these days, but it is far from dead, as some doomsayers have maintained. As an exhibition of contemporary abstract art at Hofstra University's Emily Lowe Gallery affirms, abstraction still has its devoted proponents, who are confident that it continues to be a valid art form.

However, if by validity we mean innovation, then abstract art has a meager *raison d'être*, as judged by the choices in this selection. The 14 artists in this show have not evolved or fostered sweeping new attitudes of substance toward nonrepresentational art. In fact, in certain ways the exhibition is invested with a kind of historical and nostalgic look, appearing somewhat like a recapitulation or revisit of familiar abstractions of the past.

What is valid, though, need not necessarily be innovative. One can produce something worthwhile even if it doesn't break new ground. These artists—all practicing in New York City—have studied abstraction in the last three decades almost like historians and have simply adapted its manifestations to their own sensibilities. In other words, they have chosen what is most amenable to their outlook and imbued it with a personal dimension. Their art is a fresh revisionist exercise.

The atmosphere emanating from the display, then, is one of relaxation. The headlong, frenetic urgency to come up with something radically different is not present. Instead there is a pervasive self-confidence and sense of authority. These artists know what they are doing. This encourages us to breathe and observe more easily and enjoy their work without a feeling of desperation.

Authoritative self-confidence, of course, is a quality that emboldens the artist to follow the esthetic bent of his own choosing without adhering to one particular school. Thus, all 14 artists have gone in 14 different directions, exploring 14 different abstract conceits. This makes for discriminating diversity and demonstrates as well that there is no predominant trend among abstractionists, at least in New York.

It would nonetheless be misleading to present this exhibition as an index to all abstract art being done nowadays. It is by no means a representative anthology or survey.

The fascination with geometry is still strong among abstract artists. In this show, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe uses brightly colored rectangles as a composition motif to produce a surge of energy amid dynamic contrasts and spatial thrusts. The magnitude of the oil amplifies its impact. Gerald Hayes's "Rodeo," employing acrylic, wood and photographic images, imparts a very personalized interpretation to geometry, one that emphasizes pictorial cadence and rhythm.

Shaped works, too, have endured and are represented by Ted Stamm with a few disarmingly simple geometric forms, producing a creation that redefines domineeringly the space about it. Lucio Pozzi's "Angles," one of the most provocatively intriguing examples in the show, is a fanlike composition of six plywood panels attached by one nail and painted over with conspicuously vigorous brush strokes. Don Hazlitt's oil, although it resembles a magnification of microscopic water life like a paramecium, transforms some rudimentary configurations into an unusual combination.

Another hallmark of the display is the brushstroke, reminding us that often abstract painting is simply about painting and its techniques. Its presence is especially notable in Marcia Hafif's nearly monochromatic painting as well as in a large untitled work by Harry Kramer. Both canvases are voluptuously luscious and lyrical and illustrate that painting for painting's sake is a most valid endeavor.

Nonassociational elements such as proportion, balance, scale, contrast and density are major preoccupations of many of the works, as they have been with much of modern abstract art. There is also an occasional tendency to introduce an image that looks vaguely representational.

William Williams's canvas is one such work, with its somewhat eerie use of mountainlike shapes that suggest prehistoric ranges created right before our eyes. Howard Buchwald's prepossessing oil summons up notions of a busy thickness of grass shoots interweaving and interacting in a visual explosion of quickening movement and pictorial zip.

The object lesson of this show, among other things, is that abstraction has not disappeared, that there are still valuable resources in it and that it will undoubtedly assert its presence for some time yet.