

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

SATURDAY, JANUARY 22, 2000

KENNETH BAKER

Art

Fears, Hopes — Address Unknown

2 gallery shows suggest regional styles vanishing

Not long ago, a New York look, a Los Angeles look, even a Bay Area look in contemporary art was fairly easy to spot.

Those days are over, on the evidence of two shows in which New York art predominates, "Live From New York" at Haines and "Closed Circuit" at New Langton Arts.

Whether it is a sign of a centerless art market's growing influence or of the ever faster spread of images, the work in these shows looks as if it might have been made anywhere.

Jonathan Seliger's "After Brancusi" (1999) at Haines is a small vertical monument in the form of a simulated U.S. Postal Service mailing tube stood on end.

The links its title and form make to Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column" and "Bird in Space" seem as direct as its descent from Andy Warhol's "Brillo Boxes," pivotal icons of postwar New York art.

Similarly, it is easy to find an ancestry in late '60s New York sculpture for Sharon Loudon's "Agents" (1999), little curlicues of black foam rubber scattered high on the gallery wall.

But people everywhere know the feelings these little nothings materialize: a fear of infestation and a wary hope that nameless details of our surroundings may suddenly show themselves to be portents.

The paintings of Steven Charles and James Siena also evoke aspects of contemporary life that appear to originate nowhere.

Charles makes dizzyingly complex abstract paintings that have the unschooled artist's horror of empty space but also recall '70s pattern painting — another New York phenomenon — and the paint thickets of Jackson Pollock. From a distance, they suggest psychedelic remakes of satellite surveillance photos. They evoke all too familiar feelings of perceptual and mental overload.

Siena's "Enter the Faces" (1996) is a small freehand painting of rectangles bunched within rectangles that focuses our uncertainty as to whether others see the same patterns in the world that we see.

The geometric patterns look now like abstractions, now like faces or cartoon appliances or circuit boards or some kind of runic code.

ART EXHIBITIONS

LIVE FROM NEW YORK: Paintings, sculpture and drawings. Through February 19. Haines Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 397-8114.

CLOSED CIRCUIT: Video and sound works. Through March 25. New Langton Arts, 1246 Folsom St., San Francisco. (415) 626-5416.

Langton's 'Circuits'

What the artists in "Live From New York" and "Closed Circuits" seem to share is the view that experience itself today is a condition of excess. Art affords ways of processing it.

Clenching against too much input, or speeding to keep pace with it, is implicit in much of the obsessive work at Haines.

Oakland artist Anthony Disenza's piece might have fit into either show. Disenza rescans video footage taken from cable TV in long sessions of high-speed channel surfing.

The result, projected on the wall here, is a racing, choppy stream of images full of details that feel familiar but vanish before we can recognize them.

Perhaps TV will look just like Disenza's work in 50 years, if people go on learning to see faster.

The streaming of information is nonstop in Camille Utterback's "Text Rain" (1999), too, but the

pace is dreamy and soothing.

A wall-mounted screen shows a camera's view of the gallery's opposite wall. Computer-spawned letters — the "text rain" — drift down continually from the top of the frame and land briefly at the floor of the imaged room before they fade out.

The effect is captivating, though also frustrating in that one can read only a word or phrase now and then.

Step into the camera's view — it peeps through a hole at the screen's center — and the falling letters respond by collecting all around one's figure. The piece seems to turn the mutterings of the mind inside out.

The funniest thing here is New Yorker Stacey Lancaster's "Untitled One" (1998).

Cozying up to the edge of a mirror with the camera trained on it, she remade her own image just by moving slightly.

The mirror offered her perfect symmetry, but also put a crease down the center of her face.

An inch to one side and she looks like a pneumatic Fernando Botero woman, to the other like a female Cyclops, then like a Pekingese, then like a fish in a wig. Self-caricature has never been so efficient.