

Painter's Picks: Painting, Works on Paper



By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE national competition run by Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven specifies a theme and names a well-known judge associated with that theme, which all entries must fit. When the judge is also an artist with a reputation, it's amazing how the resulting exhibition looks like so many variations on the judge's own style — as though the show was hand-picked, instead of the result of random submissions on slides.

It's painting and work on paper this year, and the theme is art "inspired by the visual elements and gestures of language." The judge was the California painter Squeak Carnwath, whose own work features odd, bright colors, quirky images and enigmatic words. Those qualities rule in "Rhythm, Gesture Metaphor." In her judge's statement, Ms. Carnwath turns a slice phrase to sum up her selections: "The work appears to be about life and navigating in a body." It's a broad description, but it leaves a lot of room for oddities and eccentricities.

Ms. Carnwath chose 22 artists from around 150 entrants. Nine of them come from the West, two from Connecticut and there are a couple of artists from New York City. Right away viewers meet something arcane (and local): Kerrie Bellitario Mileski of Stonington has set up two large masonite panels painted black to look like chalkboards, and chalk was evidently used to draw dia-

grams with numbers and lists of words among which viewers struggle to find a connection. Different handwriting styles on one board suggest that several hands participated.

A work that openly acknowledges group participation is "Life Stories" masterminded by Daniela Pellaud of Altamonte Springs, Fla. She asks viewers to write their life stories on sheets of paper, noting that it shouldn't take more than 15 or 20 minutes.



Samantha Fisher's work in oil on canvas, "Here Comes Your Man."

The papers are arranged in rows, and so far there's little to write home about.

One set of numbers that does make sense looks like it was written directly on the wall by Jenny Laden of New York City, but the checklist indicates the work is on transparent Mylar.

It's a scrawled phone number but the digits are beautifully made with charcoal and powdery pastel so that it looks like it might be something like a celestial phone number, one viewers should copy down.

A major structuring principle in the show is a simplification of the grid, the abstract composition staple made of both horizontal and vertical lines. Instead there is sometimes one resolute set of lines inspired by a Big Chief tablet, notebook paper, diary or legal pad in works titled "Daddy," "Prince," and "Rose." Fain Hancock of Pleasant Hill, Calif., seems to be commenting on contents of a stereotyped young woman's head. Each piece is a small painting featuring ruled lines as well as a small symbol, in one case a pink rose made of cake icing.

Carol McMahon of Wellesley, Mass., wants the equivalent of a bullhorn with three huge sheets of paper that she has roughly ruled with charcoal and then gone to town on with text. The works' titles are clues to why a large format was required: "Don't Do's," "Caution," and "Doesn't Really Matter." The size and intensity of Ms. McMahon's work seem to contradict the last-named title.

For Ms. Carnwath, the top winners apparently needed a lot of color, a staple of abstract composition schemes in which the eye circulates, not just moves from left to right. Samantha Fisher of Davis, Calif., composes with square blocks of advancing and receding color. But she



takes off from this regularity, especially in the painted conundrum, "Here Comes Your Man," in which the adventurous cartoon character Tin-Tin is knocked out of one of these blocks by a shadowy double. Instead of the expected Paul in jagged word balloons, Bark is written twice. The sound may be coming from the cat



Clockwise from left: Sarah Hollis Perry's "Mother's Journal," Javier Lopez Jr.'s untitled balloons, and Larry Mullins's "Sugar Beet Evenings."

who winks at viewers from a lower corner. Popular culture of a sort also inspired the other "First Honors" winner, Larry Mullins of Washington, D.C. In an amalgam of garishly colored abstract patterns, viewers can make out a rudimentary vessel or urn with "The sugar beet evenings" printed on it. On the jar's neck is Robert and in a corner is Johnson. Mr. Mullins is honoring the blues pioneer, perhaps recreating a mood the singer once put him in; in his other painting, the country singer Buck Owens is commemorated.

These days viewers are prone to examine a group show for evidence of computer assistance. The technology was smartly used by Peter Paul

when of Rossford, Ohio, to construct backgrounds featuring archeological digs for his two tableaux, each called "Evidence of Ritual Damage." The realistic-looking miniature museum displays also contain stoneware shards — something old to complement the new art-making tool.

Writing by nature tends to be done on flat surfaces, but the show contains some bond-fide sculpture. Sarah Hollis Perry of Cambridge, Mass., was able to knit paper into a life-sized bouché textured robe. She calls the sentimental result "A Mother's Journal." Finally comes a three-part piece in cast hydrocol steel that is pure white and absolutely silent. Javier Lopez Jr. of Davis, Calif., has composed a miniature Mount Rushmore with the distinctive featureless heads of Bugs Bunny, Tweety's nemesis Sylvester, and Mickey Mouse. ■

"Rhythm, Gesture, Metaphor" is at Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven through May 22.