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Celebrating 175: Mel Casas, Clippings, 1980-1987

Extracted on Mar-28-2024 06:53:00

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[[image - photograph]]

Frank Martin. ABOVE Melvin Ziegler's Public Cathedral, outside the Houston Public Library, was commissioned for the 1980 Houston Festival.

[[image - painting]]

LEFT Bert Long, The Family, 1980, acrylic on canvas with mirrors, 72 by 96 inches.

"but they are seriously underestimated by Houston collectors."

Related to this lack of support for regional artists is a general lack of real interest by Houston museums in regional artists. Except for the four-year tenure of James Harithas at the CAM, Houston's museums have so far paid only token attention to the city's own artists. Symbolic of the institutional indifference to the, is the perennially precarious status of the city's only juried museum show for Houston-area artists, a biennial sponsored for the past five years by the University of Houston's Blaffer Gallery. "We had hoped the show would move around the other Houston museums, because it's difficult for us to always hold the show with our academic schedule," says Bill Robinson of the gallery, which this year is offering an unusual number of shows of regional contemporary art. "The show is important because it's a clearinghouse for information we all should participate in. A lot of new artists emerge in it."

On the other side of the ledger, the Rice University Museum, privately supported through the Menil Foundation's Institute for the Arts, recently staged a major retrospective of Houston sculptor Jim Love. Love has long been supported by the city's single most important art patron, Dominique de Menil. And the Contemporary Arts Museum did recently announce that three Texas painters - Earl Staley and Charles Schorre from Houston and Vernon Fisher from Dallas - will be among artists to receive small one-man shows in the museum's downstairs "Perspective" gallery. Cathcart has also hired a curator from the Corcoran Art Gallery, Marty Mayo, to act as the museum's liaison to Houston's artists. However, since Cathcart's arrival, the CAM has scheduled no main gallery exhibitions for regional artists. Though Cathcart has said that she likes to follow an artist's work for three years before giving him or her a show, she has nevertheless shown a number of relatively unknown New York artists, including some represented in "American Painting: The Eighties," curated by critic Barbara Rose. Likewise, William Agee at the MFA explains that, as a general art museum, the MFA is obligated to bring works to the Houston public that they could not see elsewhere in the city. While the MFA has made very few acquisitions of work by regional artists in the last decade, it recently acquired works by a number of artists in Rose's "Eighties" show. They now hang in the museum offices.

Behind the low-key support for regional artists by Houston institutions lurks the knotty conflict between the East Coast esthetic of the Museum professionals and the distinctive regional influences on Texas artists. Although not all Houston artists fall into this category - particularly those who have moved to Houston from elsewhere during the '70s boom - a growing number of Houston painters and sculptors feel bound together by a unique esthetic orientation.

Talk of a "Texas art style" first began in the mid-'70s, when James Harithas began staging major shows at the CAM for artists like Dick Wray, Luis Jimenez and Mel Casas. While the theory of a regional esthetic has never been formally articulated, work by artists born and educated in the South and Southwest is clearly influenced by traditions



other than the abstract painting of the East Coast. The art of the South and Southwest is more romantic, less intellectualized, frequently narrative, naively intuitive and metaphorically explicit. More than other factors, the magnificent starkness of West Texas' cratered Big Bend deserts and the nature mysticism of the Indians and Mexicans how live there have influenced work by Texas artists.

Surls, who has become something of a spokesman for this romantic regional point of view, recently assembled an exhibition of work by Houston artists that he felt embodied the singularity of Texas art. The show, which was seen in October at Dallas' Exposition 500 Gallery, included work by John Alexander, Charmaine Locke, Bert Long, Jesse Lott, Suzanne Paul, Lynn Randolph, Earl Staley, James Surls, Tacey Tajan and Michael Tracy. "All these artists use nature mixed up with their psyches in a raw-bone fashion," says Surls. "Their work has got something to do with their coming from nature, being here and living on the land."

Often considered "flashy" or "abrasive," such work is regarded as a risk, particularly for an audience preferring the subtleties of New York abstraction. Consequently, with the exception of a few galleries, most of this work still cannot regularly be seen in Houston. At present, the city has few if any alternatives to the established galleries and museums.

Two possible exceptions are the Roberto Molina Gallery and the Lawndale Annex of the University of Houston. Molina has no stable artists and provides his space for a rental fee. The Lawndale Annex is a converted cable factory where the university holds its studio art classes. Directed by Surls, the Lawndale Annex now contains three exhibition areas that operate without university funds and must be supported by

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