

Four Bay Area artists contrast to formalism

METAMORPHOSIS, totems, masks and objects by Elin Elisofon, Ivan Majdrakoff, Phil Pasquini and Ursula Schneider. Whitney Chadwick is the show's guest curator. Hayden Gallery, MIT, through Nov. 3.

By Robert Taylor
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For more than a decade a formalist art academy has dominated contemporary New York painting and sculpture, but as so often happens, New York and the rest of the country are by no means in step.

The four San Francisco Bay artists on exhibit at MIT's Hayden Gallery through Nov. 3 are oriented toward objects. In fact, Ivan Majdrakoff often refers to his assemblages as "things." Concerned with the emotive, magic-bestowing, psychological associations of art rather than with line, plane or color, these artists are seemingly related to Rafael Ferrer, the Puerto Rican artist now having a show at the ICA here, since they share attitudes rejecting the ascetic doctrines of "pure" art-making. Actually, they are almost as remote from the elegant, exuberant Ferrer, who evokes the mysteries of both a personal and a cultural identity, as they are from formalism.

Majdrakoff gives us boxes and totems stuffed with or constructed from thrift-shop and five-and-ten items of the '50s and '60s — objects based on Duchamp's idea that context alters their meaning. (The context, significantly enough, has become MIT.)

Phil Pasquini also creates assembled objects, but in his table-top sculptures the material is bronze, setting up a tension between a traditional material and the ephemeral or vernacular elements.

Elin Elisofon and Ursula Schneider suggest links with "primitive" or animistic cultures. Small conical vases contain-

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ing the tightly bound, mummified bodies of birds and small animals imply ceremonial vessels; and this ritualization also carries over into Elisofon's stitched-cloth "drawings" of generalized figures, sometimes pierced with pins, which may or may not allude to voodoo or acupuncture. Schneider makes highly sophisticated, striking masks of human hair — she collects cuttings from San Francisco beauty salons — which are at their best, I think, when least like the raffia masks of West Africa, giving free rein to her inventive fantasy creatures.

The guest curator of the exhibition, Whitney Chadwick, has done a commendable job of disclosing through this quartet many of the trends of Bay Area artists, out their very eclecticism stands in the way of the show's coherence.

San Francisco artists combine the figurative traditions of northern California painting exemplified by Richard Diebenkorn, David Park and Elmer Bischoff; the West Coast tradition of assemblage, mingling the premises of surrealism together with funky or whimsical anti-art attitudes; and a variety of traditions involving collage, fetish forms and clotted, deliberately overworked "finish." The traditions exist in uneasy juxtaposition. I don't find in the San Francisco Bay approach, the consistency and depth of a true art style. Rather, there is a variety of stylizations characteristic of regional activity and demonstrating that the source of the art lies in art history, the enormous repository of the art of all cultures which artists in 1978 are plundering almost too freely, instead of in the unfettered imagination.

CATHERINE BERTULLI, watercolors. Brockton Art Center, through Oct. 22.



"Swimmers and Lights," a 1977 watercolor by Catherine Bertulli, whose first solo is at the Brockton Art Center.

The first public showing of the work of Catherine Bertulli, at the Brockton Art Center, introduces an artist of delightful originality whose watercolors look like no one else's.

Drawing is an important factor — Bertulli offers a simple, almost casual structure, the composition delicately asymmetrical and possessing off-center charm, set against accents of fluent color. Her methods seem inspired by the clear dilute washes of Demuth, who in turn owed much to Cezanne. A sparing use of pigments has the effect of reducing the picture to its fundamental expressive elements; Bertulli's spidery pencilled line plays on the white of the paper, contrasting with the luminosity of the paint. So informal is the drawing that the artist risks toppling into the area of the rough sketch; but the line is graceful enough, the handling of color fastidious enough, and the visual concepts intelligent enough to avoid this. Indeed her restraint

enhances the spontaneity of the medium. Most watercolorists seek "spontaneity" through speed of execution; Bertulli achieves it by means of an attack that always seems to deliberate. Which, come to think of it, was one reason for the freshness of Cezanne, too.

The principal sequence at Brockton concerns swimmers in the water. These images have a light-struck lyricism, catching in terms of watercolor's spatterings and abbreviations the refractions of underwater forms, the generalized contours of sun-flecked bodies and a few commanding movements. Bertulli is, I think, a watercolorist notable for her sensitivity and non-literal poise, and I confronted her work with a feeling of discovery. Also at Brockton is "The Object: Form Follows Function," a crafts show of functional pieces which I reviewed some time ago. Works in clay, fiber, glass, metal and wood by 32 New Englanders are included.