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Images at Brandeis vital, engrossing

FRESH IMAGES, work by Catherine Bertulli, Robert Ferrandini, Carol Kreeger Davidson, Jon Imber, John McNamara and Marilyn Levin. Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, through Dec. 17.

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

The Rose Art Museum's third annual group devoted to the work of regional artists, "Fresh Images" is, like its predecessors, a bountiful, lively group.

If a general word can apply to six artists of such diverse temperament, it is "vital." You may not agree with the attitudes or the execution of the work, perhaps you may think that "Fresh" is venturing on a limb to describe artists still young enough to reflect the influence of their teachers. But the show is nonetheless engrossing, simply because it reveals a lot of intelligent thinking about the problems of art and a spirited approach to solutions.

Chosen this year, are Catherine Bertulli and Robert Ferrandini of Winthrop; Jon Imber, of Somerville; John McNamara and Marilyn Levin of Brookline, and Carol Kreeger Davidson of Hartford, Conn. Davidson and Levin can be related; each makes pieces which concern the space of wall and floor, plus the properties of pictorial and sculptural elements. Their impact, however, is entirely different. Out of exceedingly simple material Davidson creates pieces which possess a chaste, classical and harmonious effect, whereas Levin's corrugated cardboard boxes, flattened and propped against the wall, suggest something of the funky background of her art experience in California, in which disposable, throwaway material is given new significance — in this instance, a visual meditation on cubism. The others of the exhibition are less easily compared.

Jon Imber does large, powerful, hieratic figurative canvases suggestive of the allegorical tendencies of Max Beckmann and the

REVIEW / ART

drawing techniques of Philip Guston. The figures are often seen close-to, features swelling to fill the pictorial space, as in his St. Christopher canvas, the patriarchal saint gazing one way and the child, whose hands are heavy and prominent, gazing the other. Imber's couples, presenting simplified volumetric shapes, foreshortenings and Byzantine frontality, express the resonance of myths which the spectator can generally comprehend, though sometimes the myths seem private.

Contrastingly, Robert Ferrandini, with pastels in mixed media, explores a more conceptual terrain. His images resemble blackboards; pictorial signs and writing are partially erased, commenting upon the nature of signs and their poetic and mystical overtones. Ferrandini's titles have the witty absurd-logic of surrealist titles, yet the appeal of the pictures exists, much of the time, on a conscious rather than an irrational level. "Thoreau's Journey Exploring the Dark Continent," for example, unfurls like an ancient chart of wonders. The eye literally wanders across the predominantly dark green field, encountering here and there written symbols such as "aardvark" or "Tyranosaurus Rex," standing for pictorial events. Color has strong psychological implications, too, steeping delicate evocative visions in an atmosphere of ambiguity — this is a world where the word "hat" may, as in a Magritte, describe a pipe.

While Ferrandini's work is mysterious and introverted, Catherine Bertulli's subjects derive from the natural order. Earlier this season Bertulli had an impressive showing of water-colors at Brockton; Brandeis presents her paintings, which reinforce that impression. She takes pleasure in the portrayal of flat, patterned surfaces, and her drawing of moose, woodpecker and turtle generates interesting figure-ground relationships. The contours of the animals flicker in and out of the ground,

and the drawing is deliberately child-like, giving her images an aspect of stylized fable. Primarily, though, the mottled shallow space enhances subtle color intensities. The off-slant compositions, the zig-zags and dots of engaging all-over patterns, spring from a fauvist tradition of color, which Bertulli treats in a fresh, engaging manner.

John McNamara, oddly, seems to me the artist of the group most closely related to Bertulli in style, though their imagery differs. He's an abstract artist whose pictures, like Bertulli's, risk decorative effects, and survive. The size of McNamara's all-over canvases is monumental, and the cosmos of visual occurrences in them is dense, rhythmic and cursive. What is especially striking about McNamara's painting is its capacity to create intimate statements on so large a scale. His color is applied in small strokes, having a somewhat textured appearance, and his looping calligraphic lines with their sinuous suggestion of Art Nouveau establish a gestural variety that is relaxed and distinctive.

Not everything about "Fresh Images" is successful — I think Levin's pieces slightly doctrinaire, still another Cubism Revisited, despite their originality in painting corrugated boxes and thereby recycling junk materials into art. I would not willingly miss them, however, nor the massive and memorable "Guardian" of Davidson. From fiberglass paper (a material sometimes used in wrapping shoes) and hardware and string, she has assembled four monolithic standing pieces around a dramatic, hard-edged wall construction. Black and white prevail, even in a semi-circle of chairs arranged before the work. The cylindrical pieces are indeed guardians, mute, monolithic presences; one has an all-white base, another black; on a third a criss-cross of tapes structures the base; and on a fourth, the black is split by a white stripe. Of such intricacies is "The Guardian" composed — conceivably, Mallarme might put it, silence as sculpture.