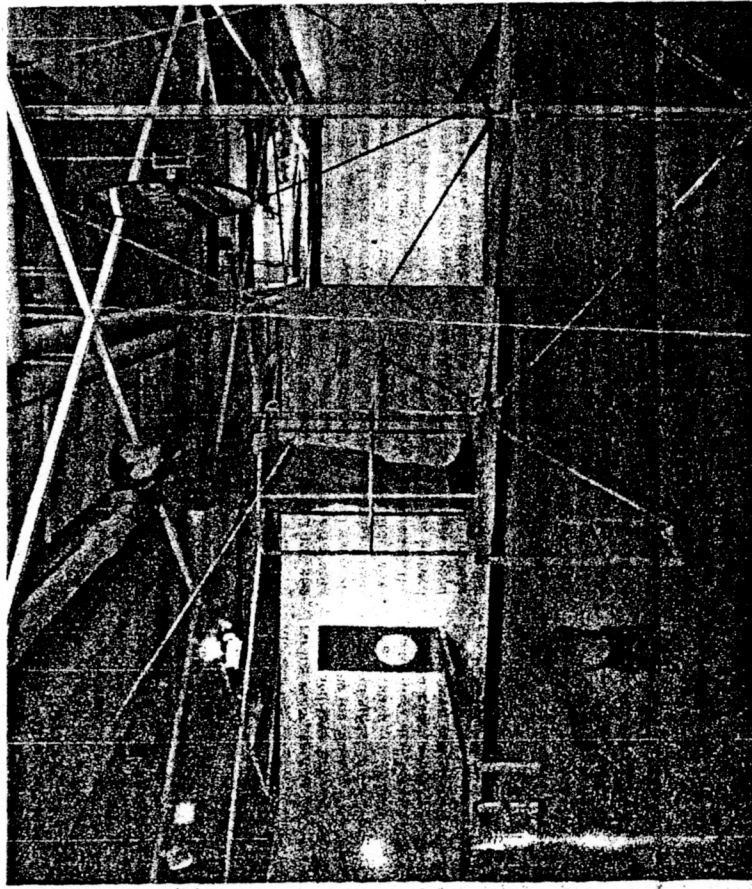


Artists Seek Physical Relationships



"Shared Views" (partial view) by Laurel Fredrickson and "Model for Wild Harmony" by David Schaefer

LIVING ROOM

at the Betty Rymer Gallery, through March 31

By Bonita McLaughlin
Viewing works of art isn't necessarily a passive experience. You walk into a gallery, a piece nearby or across the room catches your eye, and you approach it, your eyes and your mind actively seeking and questioning. You circle it, you move closer and investigate a small area, you move back again and take in the whole. Eventually you move to another piece, stop, turn, go back to the first, then move on to a third. All the while, as your mind gathers in visual information, you're not really aware of your body, your movements, or your physical relationship to the gallery space and the artwork it contains.

The five midwestern artists participating in "Living Room" at the School of the Art Institute's Betty Rymer Gallery challenge such a lack of bodily awareness. They alter portions of the gallery, invite visitors to literally enter their work, and appeal to senses other than sight, especially that of kinesthesia. Their work, writes curator Joyce Fernandes in an accompanying essay, "anthropomorphizes

the architecture of the gallery space and engages the viewer by establishing a corporeal relationship." This sort of endeavor isn't entirely new, of course—such minimalist sculptors of the 60s and 70s as Carl Andre and Richard Serra gave as much (or more) weight to relationships between body, space, and object as to strictly visual sensations, and environmental artworks like Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnel* depended for their full effect on viewer interaction. Yet as the "Living Room" installations indicate, it's not a particularly new relationship to explore, as evidenced by the following list.

A curious metal contraption, part of David Schaefer's *Model for Wild Harmony*, dominates the front of the gallery; it's essentially a three-rung ladder leading to a circular platform suspended above the floor by means of cables and painted steel beams. Both a wall label and a sticker attached to the ladder advise, "At their own risk, viewers are encouraged to climb the ladder with caution." In addition, hanging above the platform there's a convex mirror on which the word "DINGDONG" has been etched, and on a nearby wall there's a large upside-down squirrel drawn with blue sign paint.

What happens when you climb the

ladder and stand on the platform? Not much, really—you can peer into the mirror and look around the gallery or over at the squirrel. Because it's suspended via cables the platform shakes slightly, but a handrail is provided. The whole experience is initially something of a letdown—after all, you don't need to climb the ladder to read the word in the mirror or see the squirrel.

But later Schaefer's piece paid me back. Climbing about how children of a certain age take to trees almost as easily as squirrels, the delicate thin railing, shaky branches, swinging upside

down, and dropping recklessly to the ground. On one level *Model for Wild Harmony* poignantly reveals the gulf between a child's joy in movement and an adult's habitual caution. How many viewers, I wondered, would climb the ladder if it weren't permitted weren't provided? But on another level the piece is fairly cynical with its "DINGDONG" in place of an actual sound, and its squirrel looking more like a kitschy figurine than the real thing, it mocks our desire for a transcendence aesthetic experience.

Laurel Fredrickson's *Shared Views* takes a somewhat cynical stance as well. It features a long, narrow table bisected by a gallery wall; on each side

of the wall, above the table, there's a wall-mounted mirror, and at each end of the table there's a plain wooden chair. Viewers may sit in the chairs and face the mirrors, though expectations for self-reflection are thwarted by the milky white oval each mirror bears. The difficulty, even impossibility of ever really knowing yourself and others is a potentially interesting theme, but it's too bluntly expressed here: the library-style furniture, the mirrors, and the dividing wall point to issues of communication and self-knowledge but barely begin to explore them. The piece also fails to prompt viewer participation: one needn't sit in the chairs to get the point of the ovals in the mirrors.

M.W. Burn's *Sphinxes/PORES* also addresses the conveyance of knowledge, though less didactically. Set into opposite walls at the far end of the gallery are public-address speakers from which a short audiotape plays continuously. It begins with the sound of chalk on a blackboard, followed by a male voice speaking briefly from a single speaker about "an aesthetic of balance" and then "an anesthesia of balance." Then, from the four speakers on the opposite wall a man talks about a woman born with six toes on one of



her feet. Though this asymmetrical condition was painless, at the age of 13 she had the extra toe removed, setting off a series of complications that necessitated further corrective measures and caused her ever-increasing pain. The unseen man stutters slightly but never quite lets the viewer know why he catalogs the woman's medical difficulties.

There are several sphinxes in *Sphinxes/PORES*; the speaker, whose identity and reason for telling the story aren't clear; the viewer, who isn't called upon to do much but look at the blank gray walls and listen; and most of all the unidentified woman, about whom we learn very little. Was she pressured into having the toe removed? How did the surgeries, corrective shoes, braces, and finally a wheelchair affect her life? What are her thoughts about asymmetry and balance? The speaker in *Sphinxes/PORES* sounds authoritative, yet he offers only a frustrating fragment and then leaves us stranded, as we lis-

ten we experience firsthand the kind of alienation and lack of communication only hinted at in Fredrickson's *Shared Views*.

In 10 Hornum's nearby untitled installation the walls have eyes rather than voices. Inside a small, bright white room she's placed an unusually tall white stool and, set into the drywall at eye level, more than 100 color photos of eyes (all belonging to Chicagoans photographed at Daley Plaza on January 28). Upbeat Muzak plays softly, though it's sometimes drowned out by Burn's audiotape.

Of the five installations in "Living Room," Hornum's most successfully anthropomorphizes the gallery space while highlighting kinesthetic experience. The combination of the room's narrow dimensions, the too-large stool, and the life-size pairs of eyes results in a kind of Alice in Wonderland effect, triggering a discomfort one associates with crowded elevators and CTA trains. And though most of the eyes—of all ages and ethnic groups—appear to be "smiling," the harshly lit room is nevertheless vaguely irritating, a condition the nonstop Muzak only exacerbates. With a few simple yet highly expressive elements Hornum tosses aside expectations for a quiet, contemplative viewing experience and plunges the viewer mercilessly into the density of city life.

Wendy Jacob's untitled piece is even simpler, but less communicative. In fact, were it not for an identifying wall label, it might easily be missed. To the ends of two heating ducts near the ceiling she's attached long white satin bags; a hidden mechanism regulates the air blowing out of the ducts so that every few seconds the bags expand and then collapse. Languidly draped over pipes, the bags never fill completely; the "breath" they make visible is terribly weak, but it's not clear whether this impression of sickness is intentional or results from technical limitations.

Fernandes writes that "these artists want to touch their audience, to create a relationship, to become engaged." Yet the overall Spartan quality of the work in "Living Room" seems at odds with this gregarious goal. These artists too readily assume that viewing is physically passive, and most don't go far enough toward engaging other senses. Which might partly explain why the two dozen or so visitors I observed at the gallery—most of whom appeared to be the school's students and faculty—remained decidedly disengaged: several appeared not to notice Jacob's piece, none sat at Fredrickson's tables, only two climbed Schaefer's ladder, and not one listened to all of Burn's less-than-ten-minute audiotape.