

Purchase, New York
1999 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art

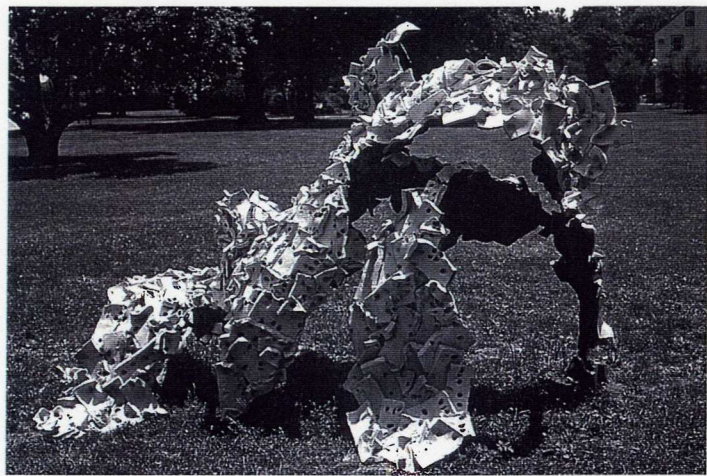
Neuberger Museum of Art
 Public art need not be practical or permanent, but it should capitalize on its power to enlighten. The Neuberger Museum of Art's exceptional 1999 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art goes a long way toward breaking down the barrier between Modernist elitism and the uninitiated by focusing on work that engages the general public. Perhaps the best example is Lynda Benglis's cast bronze *Migrating Pedmarks* (1998). Both biomorphic and gestural, the work is an unquestionably static form that looks as if it might just get up and walk away. Its numerous twisted plates, with their black and white patina, rectangular shape, and sporadic circular indents, appear as a heaving mass of dominos. Benglis softens solid mass and weight through painterly details and a gestural, seemingly windswept, composition in a work with whimsical appeal.

Susan Crowder's *Kitchen Garden* (1999) deals with environmental history. Located near the excavated remains of the Thomas house (which belonged to a family believed to be the first white settlers at this site), *Kitchen Garden* is meant as a monument to Katherine Thomas, an 18th-century woman who outlived all eight of her offspring. Crowder evokes a haunting image of Katherine maintaining the garden (its vegetables and herbs fed the family) in the face of her loss. At the center of each of two patches of bare earth stands a teepee-shaped trellis, which supports the growth of a bean plant, the one, albeit inedible, natural growth in the garden. The other plantings, the two fruit trees and the fence-climbing grapes, are synthetic, forming a span of flora that briefly parallels the area's passage from its original state to its present, unnatural incarnation as a modern college campus. Painted ceramic plates placed on

the terrain graphically illustrate the types of food that Katherine once grew here.

Another powerful piece is Michael Bramwell's *Three Squares (for the Boys on Rikers Island)* (1999), which consists of three square, ceramic-tiled floor sections (one green, one black, and one red) and a telephone cable, suspended from neighboring trees, running diagonally across at eye level. Bramwell hung pairs of cast-off sneakers, tied lace-to-lace, all along the line, a common sight in urban areas. An earthen mound, swept out by Bramwell, forms the perimeter of the work, adding an awareness of the meditative nature of performing a simple repetitive

Right: Mara Adamitz Scrupe, Labor, 1999. Solar-powered L.E.D. panel, steel, and acrylic, 66 x 18 x 18 in. Below: Lynda Benglis, Migrating Pedmarks, 1998. Bronze with black and white patina, 87 x 135 x 96 in.



task. Bramwell's visual puns, his politics, and his ability to bring an overtly urban presence to this pastoral setting are quite impressive.

John Monti's *Lemon Float* (1999) is perhaps this exhibition's most appealing work. It deals with issues

of perception in a playful and inviting way. Monti's work incorporates an existing, unused cistern, which he paints in a jarring blue color. Flanking it are two identical, hyper-pigmented forms that appear to be hybrids of a lemon and a

1950s version of a flying saucer or bio-engineered produce. Their oversized presence, which is enhanced by their proximity to the miniature pool, gives *Lemon Float* an otherworldly feel. Here, the public is encouraged to play,



by jostling the two forms about, which invokes long-forgotten childhood memories when toys were occasionally, and comparatively speaking, one's own size.

Ladder for a Beech Tree (1999), by Mary Miss, is the exhibition's most enigmatic work. Inspired by a majestic copper beech tree, Miss adds a 120-foot ladder, which runs from the center of the adjacent field to the base of the beech. The ladder is clearly measured every 20 feet with freestanding block numerals. Copper flashing covers the upper surface of this absurdly oversized, unusable ladder. The site has a dreamy, Alice-in-Wonderland presence, which is reinforced by the accentuated perspective of the ladder.

These artists, as well as those not mentioned (Siah Armajani, Lee Boroson, Bill and Mary Buchen, Jackie Chang, Tim Curtis, Kenta Furusho, Jun Kaneko, Dennis Oppenheim, Jim Roche, Mara Adamitz Scrupe, Buster Simpson, and Kenneth Snelson), create work that is sensitive, smart, and most of all, accessible.

—D. Dominick Lombardi

Above: John Monti, Lemon Float, 1999. Fiberglass and pigmented urethane rubber, 2 elements 60 x 78 x 102 in. Right: Jannis

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