

Art



Douglas M. Parker

Judy Pfaff's Sensurround Landscapes

by Hunter Drohojowska

The sculptural installations of Judy Pfaff were described by the poet/critic John Ashbery as "an exhilarating mess."

One would be hard put to get any closer to the essence of this New York artist's wildly colorful, pyrotechnical displays. During the past six years, Pfaff's installations have evolved from rooms full of angular, New Image-styled figures in spare, disjointed combinations, to more complex, anarchic amalgamations. Piles of wire and other industrial junk were suspended from the ceiling, or popped up from the floor, to be seen against walls painted in the colors and gestures of Abstract Expressionism. The viewer would experience a complete room, the visual equivalent of Sensurround. The three-dimensional elements against the two-dimensional wall-painting set up an optical ambiguity, dislocating the viewer's

sense of time and place.

Pfaff's reputation for these energetic enterprises brought her a commission from the Brooklyn Academy of Music during last year's New Wave Festival. She designed the sets for choreographer Nina Weiner's "Wind Devils." It was the artist's first experience with the stage, and with trying to confine her aesthetic chaos to the boundaries of a proscenium stage. That experience inspired, or at least influenced, her most recent sculptures on view at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery through April 14.

These sculptures are unprecedented in the artist's oeuvre for their independence as separate pieces. While they interact with one another in the gallery, the presentation is as an exhibition rather than an installation. Each is a tableau, more a painting in three dimensional relief than a sculpture. In other words, they look like stage sets. The elements that previously empowered whole rooms — landscapes

evoked by saturating sweeps of brilliant color painted on the walls as a backdrop to figures or forms — are now condensed, rendered even more dynamic by their focused force.

The gallery is crowded with these fantastic forests, so cleverly articulated they seem to grow before our eyes. The largest work in the show retains characteristics of Pfaff's earlier installations, with many free-standing forms extending into the gallery. The background consists of unpainted plywood sheets with a hinged cutout of a tree which swings outward to create both the image and its absence.

Pfaff is a genius at manipulating positive and negative space. She obsessively details every square inch of a work to make it come forward or recede before the eye. When a viewer examines areas of the work that are seemingly concealed — behind some cut-out shape, for instance —

one finds them treated with impressive care.

The other "trees" in the large forest have been built of wooden, aluminum, and metal-net tubes, some of which are brightly painted. The bushes and scrub are conveyed by tussocks of wire. A painted "boulder" is supported against the ceiling by a thin wire pillar. A "cloud" is rendered by a large, irregular oval of wire, also on a thin pedestal. To one side, there stands an actual, fat tree trunk, decorated with black and white paint and a few hatch marks, as though to juxtapose the reality to the abstraction.

This random association of elements achieves a landscape effect more concrete than atmospheric. It reads as clearly as a Cezanne landscape where the trees are entwined with the mountains and clouds in slashes of paint. In this, and all of her works, Pfaff borrows her visual language and gestures from art history. Like so many of her post-modern contemporaries, she selects from what exists as much as she invents, as though the world of art history were now a plenum, too full for further formal innovation.

The "forest" at the far end of the gallery is a riot of Fauvist color and stroke, reminiscent of Andre Derain. Unnatural blues, reds and greens build up a mountainous background from which jagged planes jut out and support muscular tube-trees in a drunken dance.

On the opposite wall of the gallery, the forest is serene and stark. White and black tree trunks, proudly vertical and bleak, rise before a plywood background, which is slashed and hacked like a woodcut block. The cool, somber ambience recalls landscapes of the 19th-century artist Caspar David Friedrich. Pfaff may have incorporated the woodcut technique to reinforce the Teutonic impression.

Pfaff creates her works with the sort of intense spontaneity used by the action painters of the 1950s, and she leans towards equal monumentality. The elements of each sculpture were sent out from her New York studio and assembled and altered here according to the demands of the gallery context. Although obviously intellectual, Pfaff's compositional decisions are ultimately visceral. The language of art history, which she so freely borrows, becomes a personal expression, taking new meaning through context and juxtaposition. Pfaff's work has always been smart and appealing, but this latest series, I think, reaches a new level of seduction. ■