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ART: 4 YOUNG EAST VILLAGERS AT SON- NABEND GALLERY

by Roberta Smith

THE widely anticipated group exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery, 420 West Broadway, near Spring Street, brings some of the best and brightest young talent of the East Village art scene to prominent light in the SoHo emporium of Ileana Sonnabend. The artists are Ashley Bickerton, Jeff Koons, Peter Halley and Meyer Vaisman, all under 34 years old. Their work is seen by some to herald the return of an art that is certifiably American and firmly rooted in the Pop-Minimal-Conceptual tradition. It clearly replaces Neo-Expressionist excess with cool calculation, and its emergence is definitely one of the more hyped events in this hype-prone decade.

This show has a bumptious, youthful aggressiveness, stemming both from overcrowding and from the art itself. There's a nice buzz among the various sensibilities, despite the fact that all, excepting Bickerton, have looked better elsewhere. The atmosphere is redolent with "appropriation," the strategy of using images, materials and forms that have had other lives, other uses, in other contexts. Bickerton may decorate his boxy, object-like paintings - which are shaped like little footlockers and have hardware to match - with silhouettes from the New York subway map. Koons takes a number of figurines and dolls more usual to dime stores and gift shops, and casts them in stainless steel, treating a material more normal to kitchen utensils and appliances as if it were bronze.

Vaisman's canvases are printed with magnified images of their own weave. In one instance, four such canvases, stacked on the floor to form a low-lying square, are topped with four toilet seats - privy style - whose lids are covered with the printed canvas as if it were designer fabric. Halley's geometric abstractions suggest diagrams of battery cells with conduits or prison cells with barred windows (that is, electrical or social systems), while their powerful fluorescent colors come from somewhere beyond art. Overall, the ambition here is to make art that views both life and other art in a highly critical manner. The effect, sometimes provocative, sometimes merely titillating, is of elaborate puzzles to be deciphered by the mind and eye.

This is particularly true of Bickerton's work, the most bumptious, engaging and least didactic on view. His work is decorated with a colorful, carefully applied patchwork of motifs that suggest diagrams, insignia and emblems, plus occasional bas-relief rocks. The shapes on "Abstract Painting for People" are cross-sections and profiles of plumbing fixtures. Bickerton continually plays with different levels of communication; his premise seems to be that everything is abstract, and nothing is. His hard-to-read customized letters, like the ghoulish rendering of "WALL" across the bottom of "Wall Wall No. 7," point up his penchant for making

every detail of the art object seem custom made. He even attaches his work to the wall with heavy metal brackets, reminiscent of those used by Robert Ryman, but robustly exaggerated. Still, what is to be made of an artist, who, like a high schooler in puppy love, letters "Susie" on the thick sides of his objects wherever possible? This last should be a passing phase.

These artists also claim to be interested in dealing with the commodity status of the art object and the artist's role as producer of luxury items. Vaisman invariably stacks his canvases, three or four deep, out from the wall or up from the floor, to point up art's endless manufacture. (The smart artist always carries a few spares, his work seems to say.) Vaisman's magnified canvas weave is a second ironic device and equally effective: a joke on modernist self-referentiality that supplies a wonderfully homey texture - intimate, tweedy and upholstered. Unfortunately, here, although certainly not elsewhere, the devices themselves are better than the elements he adds to them. Thus, the relatively plain "Filler," that comes without the unexplained holes, the caricatures of the artist's face or the toilet seats, is most convincing.

Koons's art trafficks most completely in already existing commodities. The show's only sculptor and most developed artist, Koons has made a name for himself by presenting vacuum cleaners and basketballs in pristine light- or water-filled vitrines, creating works of a strange, disembodied beauty that expand our notion of what sculpture is and means. His use of glistening stainless steel converts a life-size bust of Louis XIV, a troll doll, a small doctor-patient scene straight out of Playboy and other items into tough, glamorous objects - adamantly contemporary and seriously expensive - without discussing their original age, cheapness or ugliness. Sometimes such warps become forcefully visual, even abstract. A maudlin, ornate present-day porcelain comprising lady, courtier and coach becomes in stainless steel a shimmering, fast-action Medardo Rosso. But, if more attuned to the history of sculpture, these objects are often less exciting sculpturally than Koons's previous efforts. The one exception is the oversize rabbit, with carrot, once made of inflatable plastic. In stainless steel, it provides a dazzling update on Brancusi's perfect forms, even as it turns the hare into a space-invader of unknown origin.

Invariably, a group show such as this pinpoints as many differences as similarities. The work of Halley is the most abstract and becoming more so. Although the cell-conduit titles persist, the new Halleys have been streamlined, stripped of their impure, evocative layer of visual association. The diagrammatic schemes have been replaced by monochrome panels, sometimes underscored by a single black line on its own narrow panel. Somehow this conjures up the same old 60's purities - bigger-scaled and brighter, perhaps - but corrupted mainly by references to other earlier purities, to Barnett Newman's zips, Kenneth Noland's stripes, and Ellsworth Kelly's monochromes. However, Halley has created an orange-on-black Newmanesque work, a slightly undersize rectangle sporting an extra fat vertical zip. It disconcerts the Newmans of our mind's eye, initiating a subtle rearrangement of form and content. As with all else in this exhibition, further amplification is eagerly awaited. (Through Nov. 8.) Also of interest this week; " 'F' Four French" (Lang and O'Hara Gallery, 568 Broadway, at Prince Street): At present, a new generation of French artists seems to be just around the corner, artists that New York should see more of. In conjunction with the Guggenheim exhibition of contemporary French art, Lang and O'Hara, a SoHo gallery, has mounted " 'F' Four French," curated by Jerome Sans. Sans's choices, three artists and a team of two, all in their early 30's, are quietly substantial. Jean-Francois Brun and Dominique Pasqualini work together as Information Fiction Publicite, a name that covers a lot of territory. They exhibit an installation of glowing Duratran cloud images dispersed on wall, floor and ceiling. Bernard Frize's paintings evince a colorful, soft-edged geometry that is savvy and nonchalant. Jean-Michel Alberola, the best known of the participants, strains to be all things to all esthetic viewpoints. Here, he mixes painting, drawing and photography with a soupcon of installation, but his semiabstract canvases of ancient themes are improving.

Most impressive of all, however, is Sophie Calle's work, a combination of texts and photographs of a sort that Americans call narrative art. Calle asked seven people, blind from birth,

to describe the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. She has printed their answers, taken stark black and white portraits of them and made color photographs based on the beautiful sights they described, all of which constitute the work. Calle's presentation, with dark frames on every element, is perhaps too lush, nor is this reviewer entirely certain that she does not exploit her subjects. Nonetheless, this is a terse and moving report on the vision that persists in blindness. (Through Nov. 8.) David Reed (Max Protetch, 37 West 57th Street): David Reed's abstract paintings have been developing for more than a decade. Handsome, extremely smart, and a little slick, they combine the unlikely traditions of Pop and color-field painting, also bringing into play the current taste for photography. Reed has both stuck to his guns and allowed his art to be improved by what is going on about him. He has paid special attention to James Rosenquist's splicing techniques and jarring changes of pace, while developing the approach of Jules Olitski and Lawrence Poons, for whom application is all. Reed's tool of choice seems to be a long trowel or knife, which enables him to ladle on color in smooth repeating arcs or cake-icing helixes. With each stroke he also scrapes through to the colored or white grounds beneath, and these anterior hues, showing through, create the photographic effects. Reed has expanded his scale and his palette. His use of hard-edge insets, abstractions within abstractions, gives his art a snappy self-consciousness similar to David Salle's. It is intriguing to see Reed use this mind-set to rev up color field's long-cold engines. (Through Nov. 1.) James Brown (Castelli Gallery, 420 West Broadway, near Spring Street, and Castelli Uptown, 4 East 77th Street): James Brown is plagued by an excess of facility. Few artists of his still-young generation, known for its precocious talent, can slather and scumble paint with such combined gusto and delicacy, or skitter lines across canvas with such nervous graffiti-like finesse. But Brown's art, while beautiful and a pleasure to view, wears thin fast. All too frequently it glosses Cy Twombly's style and seems destined for the category of great illustration.

Brown's new sculpture at the Castelli Gallery is cobbled together from arty looking old scraps of wood and furniture. His favorite painting motif, a long-jawed, mask-like face, has found its dimensional equivalent in wonderful old wood ironing boards fastened upright to antique bases. The effect is altogether African, and when Brown attaches a chair back to one of these boards, Picasso's bicycle-seat bull's head also comes too readily to mind.

Brown is much more in his element at Castelli Uptown, where a series of terra-cotta plaques and urns, marked, gouged and glazed, are being shown in New York for the first time. The urns are negligible, but the plaques, measuring about 22 by 18 inches each, are often quite good. In them, the clay offers Brown's touch some much-needed resistance, and glazing roughens up the relentless niceties of his brush. Here Brown's haute primitivisme gets down to basics, becoming at once ironic and serious about the modern, the primitive and the modern's love of the primitive. Without such undeniable claims to fine art, the terra-cotta plaques come quite a bit closer to the real thing. (The Castelli Gallery show is through tomorrow; the Castelli Uptown show is through Nov. 8.)