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ALAN SARET: EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS IN A MULTI-FACETED CAREER

by Michael Kimmelman

The retrospective of about 50 of Alan Saret's works at the P.S. 1 Museum in Queens is organized by Alanna Heiss and Chris Dercon to honor someone who has been in many ways unjustly neglected over the last 25 years, although it is difficult to say whether the show does this artist more good than harm.

Mr. Saret is seen at his best, as in the airy, ethereal sculptures of tangled wire for which he has been known since he emerged as one of the "anti-form" artists in the late 1960's. He is also seen as the clumsy painter of pseudomythological images based on the artist's ideas about life and the cosmos, or what he has called the "mythical, mystical, magical matrix of mankind." And Mr. Saret is seen as the sculptor of the recent "Junk Bond Series" - constructed partly from sponges, tiles, light bulbs and plastic bottles - which seems a strained attempt at wordplay and whimsy.

He is seen, in other words, as an artist of unevenness. A stronger case might have been made for him in a smaller, more ruthlessly edited exhibition that included more of the early works, which are among his finest. Still, Mr. Saret has spoken of his sculptures, drawings, architectural projects and paintings as being all of a piece, so that to have overlooked one aspect of his work would have been to give a false impression.

And it is true that important connections emerge in the show between his abstract drawings and sculptures, his sculptures and architectural designs. "Loop Nodes and Sweep Isolated Loop," from 1967, for example, one of Mr. Saret's "gang drawings" made with a fistful of colored pencils, describes an amorphous pattern of lines and shapes that could serve as a sketch for one of the sculptures.

The drawings have a beauty entirely their own. Bamboo thickets, fireworks, Impressionist landscapes, Chinese calligraphy and the works of Cy Twombly are a few of the myriad associations they can bring to mind. Yet there is no denying that in their emphasis on loose, transparent forms they explore themes Mr. Saret develops most elaborately in his wire constructions.

The 45-year-old artist has always conceived of sculpture idiosyncratically. Suggestions of weightlessness, flexibility, transience and insubstantiality are as fundamental to him as mass and permanence were to a sculptor like Michelangelo. "Annamalaxxy" (1980), one of many vermicelli-like works that he made from a mound of nickel wire, is effective precisely because it looks nothing at all like a traditional piece of sculpture. The gentlest breeze would seem capable of blowing it out the window.

Like other artists of his generation who became associated with the "anti-form" movement, including Keith Sonnier, Robert Morris and Richard Serra, Mr. Saret has favored not only a kind of shapelessness, but also a variety of unconventional, mundane materials, which he has conceived partly as an assault on the notion of art as a precious commodity.

When not working with wire, he has used rubber and paper, as in works like "Hollow Mountain" and "White-the-Ghost," two sculptures from 1968, which are among several objects that have been meticulously reconstructed for this exhibition. Mr. Saret has also used wood and bamboo for "The India Ramp," a temporary construction he erected in New Delhi for the Second Indian Triennale. The three years that Mr. Saret spent in India, from 1971 through 1973, were particularly crucial to his development. The experience deepened not only his interest in spirituality, but also his predilection to view art in ritual terms.

Thus, when he punctured a small hole in the brick wall of his studio, and another in a wall at P.S. 1 in 1976, Mr. Saret intended the beams of sun that came through the openings to evoke thoughts of a divine light. And when he constructed around the same time his "Bi-Column Temple and Water Arrangement," which consisted of a bathtub at the end of a ramp and between two Corinthian columns, he wanted to bring to mind the symbolism of immersion in water and ritual bathing that is common to so many religions.

The wire sculptures beg to be seen in the same context. They allude to clouds, clusters of galaxies, primordial matter and alchemical processes. In a statement that accompanies the exhibition, Mr. Saret writes of "small particles in a vastness, matter and energy transposing."

He continues: "It is this dispersion of opacity and opening that I call a regeneration or spiritualization of matter."

In recent years, he has, with mixed results, added color and a measure of playfulness to his sculptures, most successfully in works from the mid-80's like "Gemna" and "Flora Tresor Carmen," which consist of varieties of wires of different widths, colors and textures, wound together in fanciful patterns.

Mr. Saret comes across, then, as inconsistent, but, perhaps most importantly, he also emerges from this retrospective as a genuine individualist - a hippie during what has been called the age of greed, a spiritualist at a time when irony has become an artist's expected mode of communication. All of which is to say that Mr. Saret remains, in the best sense of the word, eccentric.

Alan Saret's works remain on view at the P.S. 1 Museum, 46-01 21st Street, Long Island City, Queens, through March 11.