

ART VIEW/Michael Brenson

Quiet Art Need Not Be Boring or Wimpish

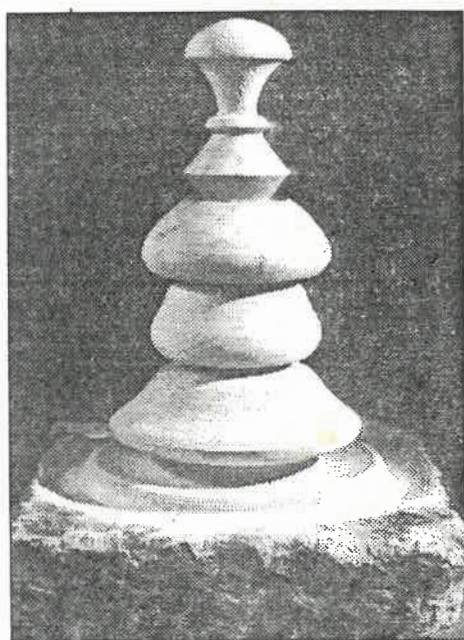
THE SPOTLIGHT OF THE ART world is rarely drawn to art that is quiet and discreet. New York is so noisy, so swollen with information, so restless with issues that seem to demand immediate attention, that reticent, self-contained art is easily overlooked or dismissed. There is a general assumption — particularly in New York — that an art of introspection and tact has little or no ability to deal with those pressing issues with which the art world is always concerned.

This assumption is not without truth. Art that is the product of a sensibility that is reserved and modest is not likely to take anyone's breath away or expose raw nerves. It will not make anyone feel that the fundamental contradictions of the moment are being uncovered and considered. It does not have the ability to claim the attention of the art world. In short, it will never replace the kind of bustling, immediate art that is at home in the lights and action of a media age.

What is not true is the assumption that art that is modest and discreet automatically lacks nerve and is intrinsically boring and wimpish. An art of reserve may not be able to release and channel the anger and frustration that are always near the surface of the art world, but there is nothing wrong with swimming in waters that are not stirred by bitterness and rage. It may not hit anyone on the head, but it can have its own kind of punch. And it is by no means certain that quiet art is any less willing to struggle against limits than art that wears defiance on its sleeve.

There are several sculpture shows in New York now that suggest what a reserved, essentially private artistic sensibility can do. The work in these shows deals with many issues, from the fragility and force of nature, to the nature of perception, to the dialogue within the self between assertiveness and self-effacement, silence and sound.

Whenever you find art that unfolds slowly and patiently, you will find an art without cynicism that is as willing to listen as to speak. In their belief in patience and silence, the sculptors in these shows implicitly argue not only for provoking the public but also for allowing it to be. The quietest art often has an attentiveness and a precision that are

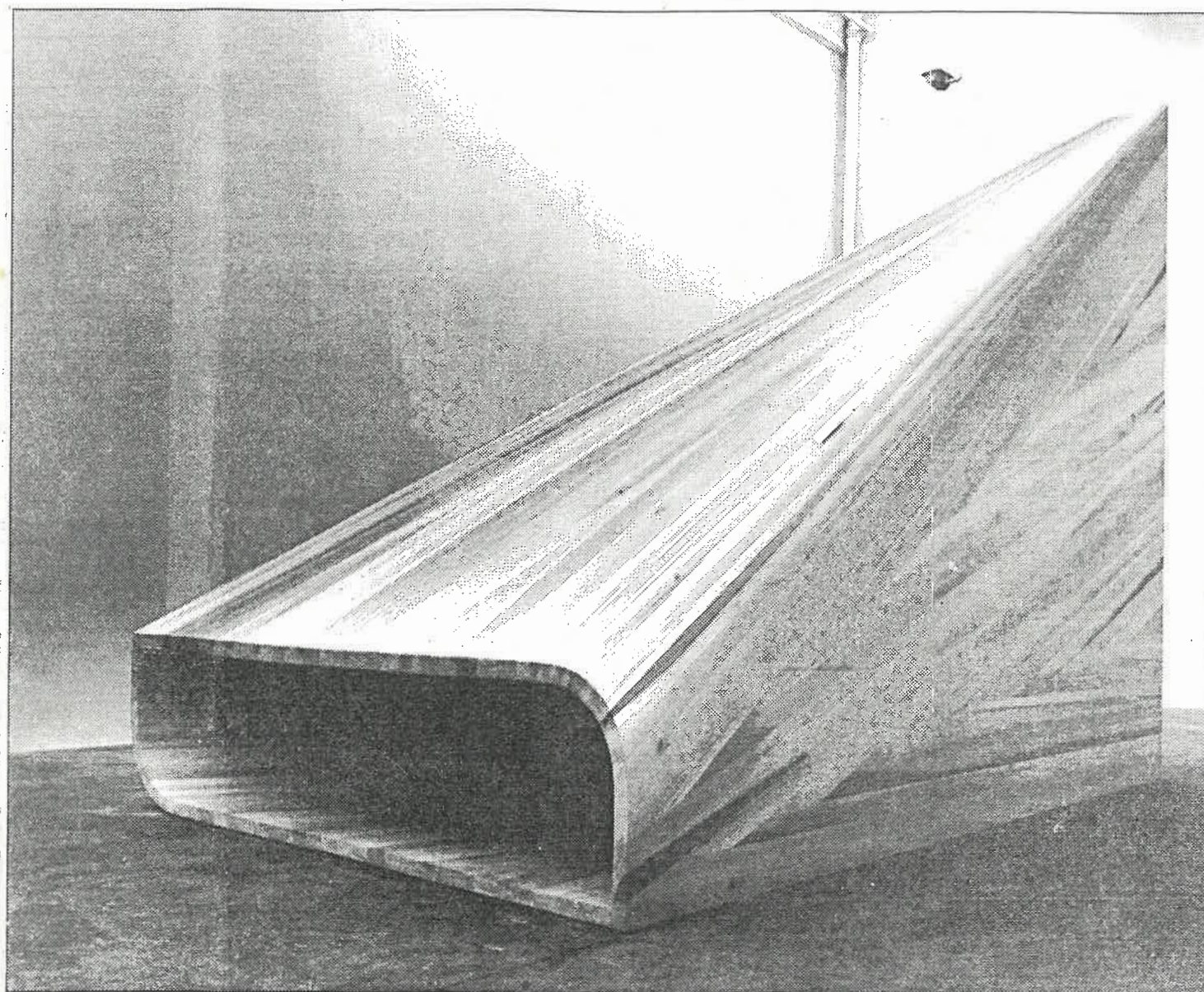


Joel Fisher's "Untitled, 1989"—the ability to make a familiar post-modern point about context and diversity in an unfamiliar way

themselves a moral fact. And no one should underestimate what deliberate, muted, well-crafted art is capable of. It is impossible to set limits on what any artist with a distinct and poetic sensibility can achieve. In the end, convulsive and contained, extroverted and introverted art complement each other as fundamentally as the pre-World War I Picasso and Braque.

Indeed it is clear from these shows that any dichotomy between these two ways of feeling is false. In any enduring brash art, there remains a secret. In any influential secretive art, there is a public statement.

The sculptors are David Rabinowitch (at the Barbara Flynn Gallery, through Feb. 28), Maren Hassinger (at the SoHo 20 Gallery, through Dec. 9), Abraham David Christian



David Rabinowitch's "Open Wood Construction (Poplar)"—something of the quality of a manifesto

Jay Manis

Shows by five sculptors are in some way meditations on what to reveal and what to conceal.

(at the Scott Hanson Gallery, through Wednesday), Joel Fisher (at the Diane Brown Gallery, through Saturday) and Houston Conwill (at the Museum of Modern Art, through Jan. 9).

Their ages range from 37 (Christian) to 46 (Rabinowitch). Conwill is from Louisville, Hassinger from Los Angeles, Rabinowitch

from Toronto and Fisher from Ohio. Christian, whose name is partly assumed, is a West German citizen who studied with Joseph Beuys and prefers to keep his birthplace to himself. All five sculptors have studios in New York. Rabinowitch also has a studio in the Netherlands. Christian spends the better part of each year in West Germany and Japan.

All have been influenced by Minimalism, which helps explain their involvement with closed geometrical shapes. Most of their work is, on one level, abstract. When there are suggestions of the human figure, as in the sculptures by Christian, they are controlled by references to architecture and furniture.

Each sculptor is involved with symmetry. Each maintains a dynamic dialogue between containment and expression — a dialogue that may in some way be the art. Each show

is in some way a meditation on how much to reveal and how much to conceal. In each of these sculptors, there is a struggle between a feeling of humility and restraint and a need to make a statement that is bold and clear.

Christian's sculptures are the most delicately balanced. Many of his works are white. While they look like plaster, they are in fact made of paper. A number of them look like disks aligned one on top of another like a pile of oversized toadstools or miniature flying saucers.

No matter how similar they may seem, the disks are usually different in size, which helps create an unusual sense of sculptural movement. As you move around these sculptures, they seem to rotate with you. You can

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