

In the Hudson Valley, Three Moderns, One Age 91

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

New York Times; Jul 23, 1993

pg. C24

Reviews/Art

In the Hudson Valley, Three Moderns, One Age 91

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

In the Hudson Valley are surveys of the works of three very different contemporary artists: the eccentric self-searchings of Jonathan Borofsky are at the Hudson River Museum, the modernist drawings and sculptures of Dorothy Dehner at the Katonah Museum of Art, and the cerebral, architecturally derived constructions of Siah Armajani at the Storm King Art Center.

Yonkers

"Subject(s): Prints and Multiples by Jonathan Borofsky, 1982-1991," at the Hudson River Museum, is an illuminating survey, although you may still leave it wondering just what to make of this hard-to-place figure who has created an art out of his own quirky psyche.

The show includes nearly 50 prints and so-called multiples, in this case videos and sculptures, that give a fair sense of the range and character of his achievement. Here are the familiar Borofsky images: the everyman in hat and coat carrying a briefcase; the "Molecule" men riddled with holes that make them look like pieces of Swiss cheese; the giant man wielding a hammer. Here are the images of numbers that document Mr. Borofsky's obsessive process of counting toward infinity, and the standing sculpture of a red light that pulses to the sound of his heartbeat.

All of them represent, more or less directly, Mr. Borofsky himself. It is the benign disorder of his imagination, his ambiguous and disorienting combination of naïveté and sophistication, that is on view. His works cajole, preach, boast, dream, confide, obfuscate. They are conspicuously, studiously without a single, identifiable style. They may be scrawled in a busy hand or drawn with patient skill. They may consist of some feel-good, vaguely spiritual sentiments written out, like "Art Is for the Spirit" or "All Is One," which reflect his hippie roots. Or they may have the sober steadiness of his interviews on video with California prison inmates.

A very few of the works, especially the woodblock monoprints on hand-made paper of "Man With a Briefcase," published by Gemini G.E.L., are extremely beautiful. But as always with this artist, it is less for individual pieces than for the show as a whole — as a kind of single installation or performance, here presented in one large space — that Mr. Borofsky makes the strongest impression.

To the extent that the show is affecting, it is not for any particular work but for its overall, oddly delicate, even tender quality, which has to do with the simplicity and directness of Mr. Borofsky's sentiments. Partly it has to do as well with the essentially optimistic notion he projects of art as a common social bond.

The show has been organized by the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H. The curator is James Cuno, the director of the Harvard University Art Museums, formerly the director of the Hood, who has written a catalogue that includes entries informative about Mr. Borofsky's idiosyncratic iconography. Ruth Fine of the National Gallery of Art in Washington also contributes an essay about the com-

plex and collaborative process that went into the making of many of these works.

Katonah

The 60-year retrospective of the work of Dorothy Dehner at the Katonah Museum of Art pays tribute to an artist of appealing gifts. Ms. Dehner, now 91, has over the course of her long career absorbed many of the currents of modernism that have shaped American art since the 1930's.

The show begins with a still life painting that suggests the influence of Purism, and goes on to present drawings from the 40's that include Surrealist landscapes of a deeply per-

sonal and sometimes disturbing iconography, as well as biomorphic abstractions. From the late 40's and early 50's are abstractions that resemble grids or cityscapes or architectural plans, and works that share with the Abstract Expressionists of her generation a preoccupation with mythological subjects.

Ms. Dehner began to make sculpture in the 1950's, at first in bronze, then wood, then steel and aluminum. But she continued to draw, and the show is useful for presenting related drawings and sculptures. One sees from these juxtapositions the extent to which Ms. Dehner draws like a sculptor and also sculptures like a painter, which is to say that many of her sculptures are frontal and flat. They return often to a specific repertory of shapes — crescents, circles,

triangles — grouped as if in a scaffold or arrayed in tall totems or along wide bases, like landscapes.

The interplay of positive and negative spaces activates many of these sculptures, as it does the drawings related to them. Some of Ms. Dehner's liveliest and most graphic works are her earliest sculptures and the wood totems from the early 70's. The more recent sculptures have got bigger, less refined, more generic, with the exception of "Chopiniana," a table-top ensemble in three pieces that, like the drawing from which it derives, illustrates Ms. Dehner at her most lyrical.

It's a pity that the show does not include the tiny paintings from the 30's, in emulation of a Book of Hours, illustrating scenes from her marriage to the sculptor David Smith. As

it happens, a selection of these works is on view now at the Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, across the Hudson, and anyone who visits the show in Katonah should make the trip there.

It was only when Ms. Dehner separated herself from her often abusive husband that she began to enjoy a career on her own as a sculptor. This show performs the valuable service of presenting her as she should be seen, individually, as an artist worthy of serious attention.

Mountainville

The best work in the exhibition of recent sculptures by Siah Armajani at the Storm King Art Center is the one on which the show is based: "Gazebo for Two Anarchists: Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini" is a 32-foot-long, open metalwork structure set on a low hill, bridging a small gully, with a view of the rolling fields and surrounding mountains. On either end of it are places to sit, barred cells that can bring to mind prisons even as they inspire repose.

Mr. Armajani is at his best here, where he adapts the vocabulary of vernacular architecture to sculptures both abstract and practical, and where he suggests at once openness and enclosure. It is also here that his debt to the Russian Constructivists, formally and philosophically, can be clearly perceived, at the same time that he engages a viewer on a visceral, emotional level.

The work was commissioned last year by Storm King, and inspired the accompanying exhibition of nearly a dozen sculptures, none of which, alas, rises to the same level. The Iranian-born artist, who since the early '60's has lived and worked in Minnesota, specializes in a cerebral art that can seem dry and cold. He has been inspired by some of the great American writers, poets and thinkers, including Jefferson, Whitman and Emerson, and his work aims to evoke some of the political ideals and reformist zeal of these figures. His combinations of eclectic architectural forms speak to democratic notions about harmony in diversity.

But they can look clunky and hard to digest. The best of the works in this exhibition turn out to be the most modest: a group of reliefs that Maureen Megerian, a curator at Storm King, aptly relates to Persian miniatures. They are playful, sprightly and the most strongly evocative of the American towns, parks and railways that have been Mr. Armajani's long-time inspiration.

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

"Gazebo for Two Anarchists: Gabriella Antolini and Alberto Antolini" by Siah Armajani, at Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, N.Y.

Jerry L. Thompson