

Art

Tantalizing Reflections

At the Hirshhorn, the Power of 10 Artists

By Jo Ann Lewis
Special to The Washington Post

If the Hirshhorn's new show, "Awards in the Visual Arts 10," is a true reflection of what's going on in the art world today, things may be looking up. After a complicated selection process, 10 good artists, most in their forties, have hereby been catapulted onto a national stage, a challenge most seem ready for. Little new ground is broken in this show, but there is a sincerity and intensity of purpose among these artists that validates even the least of their works.

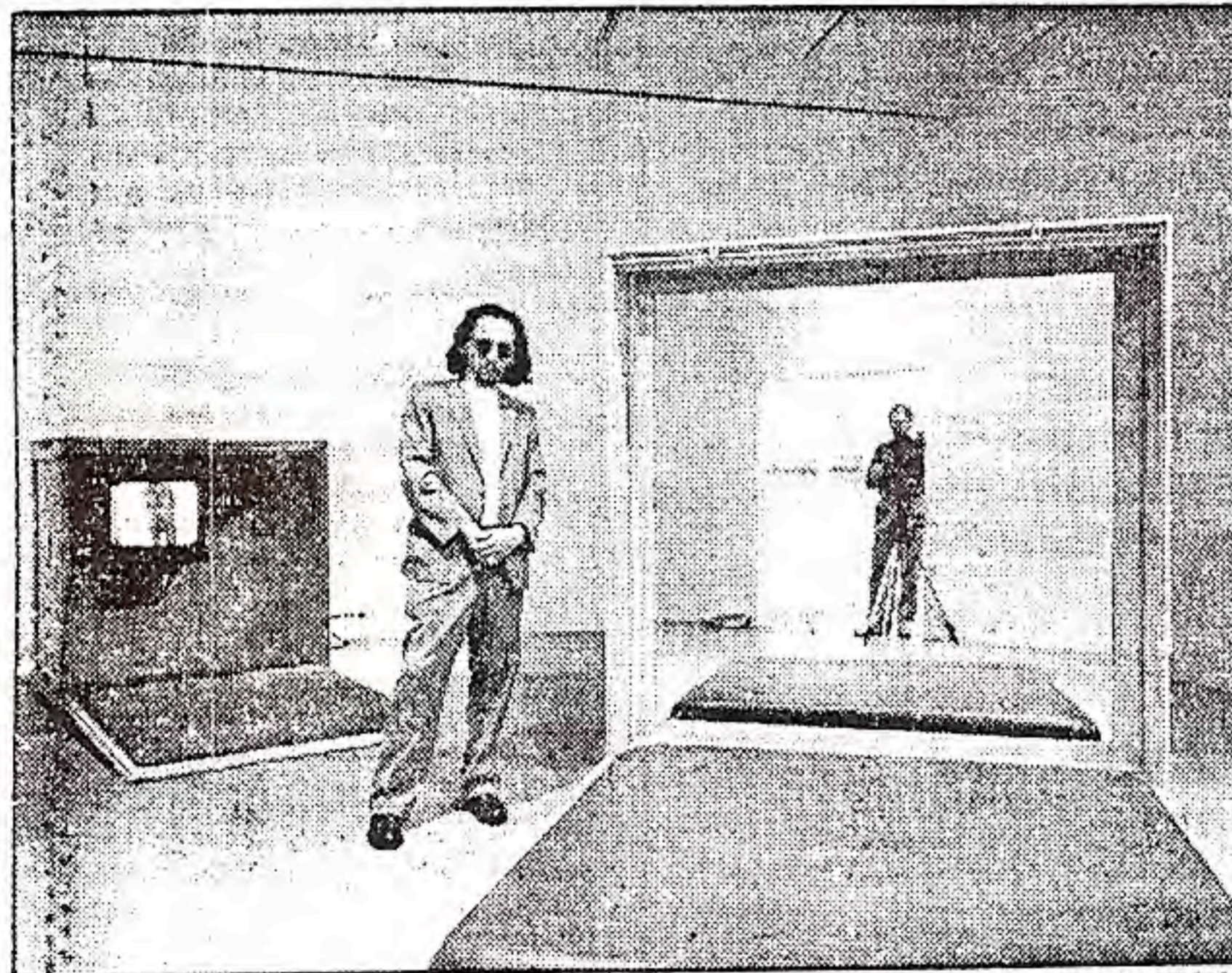
The installation by San Francisco artist Tony Labat is an appropriate opener for this closely watched enterprise. Enter the first gallery and you see yourself on a TV monitor, courtesy of a surveillance camera that watches as you peer into a

large, padded wooden crate that lies open in the middle of the floor. Much like the box a magician uses to saw people in half, this mysterious, tantalizing object is centered by a large mirror that is in fact a two-way mirror, turning the viewer into both narcissist and voyeur.

Most important, however, the work raises a question that haunts us all these days: whether anything, ever again, will be simply what it seems. This piece, in fact, is more than it seems: Folded up, it becomes its own packing crate.

The Hirshhorn was apparently haunted by a fear that some of these works might offend some viewers, and posted a tiny warning sign at the exhibition's entrance, saying: "To our visitors: Some works of art in this exhibit employ subject matter

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BY LEE STALSWORTH

Tony Labat and "David and Goliath IV" installation.

Hirshhorn Show

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and language that individual viewers may find disturbing."

In normal times, it would have been pointless. But in the present atmosphere, it is there less to shield the Hirshhorn than the show's organizers, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem, N.C., which found itself threatened with the loss of crucial federal backing last year after including the work of photographer Andres Serrano in a show funded, in part, with a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. A similar grant—along with \$425,000 given in equal parts by the Rockefeller Foundation and BMW of North America—funded this year's version of the annual show. For the NEA especially it was a very good investment.

Anyone who isn't disturbed by the subject matter in Adrian Piper's appropriated newspaper photo of a lynched black man would have to be unconscious. It is Piper's intention to disturb, to confront her viewers with the fact of racism, past and present—to make them think.

Apart from that, and the use of a bad word or two in Cary Leibowitz's piece about the miseries of being a teenage homosexual, visitors will find little to offend, but much to delight the eye and mind in this most handsome of Hirshhorn shows.

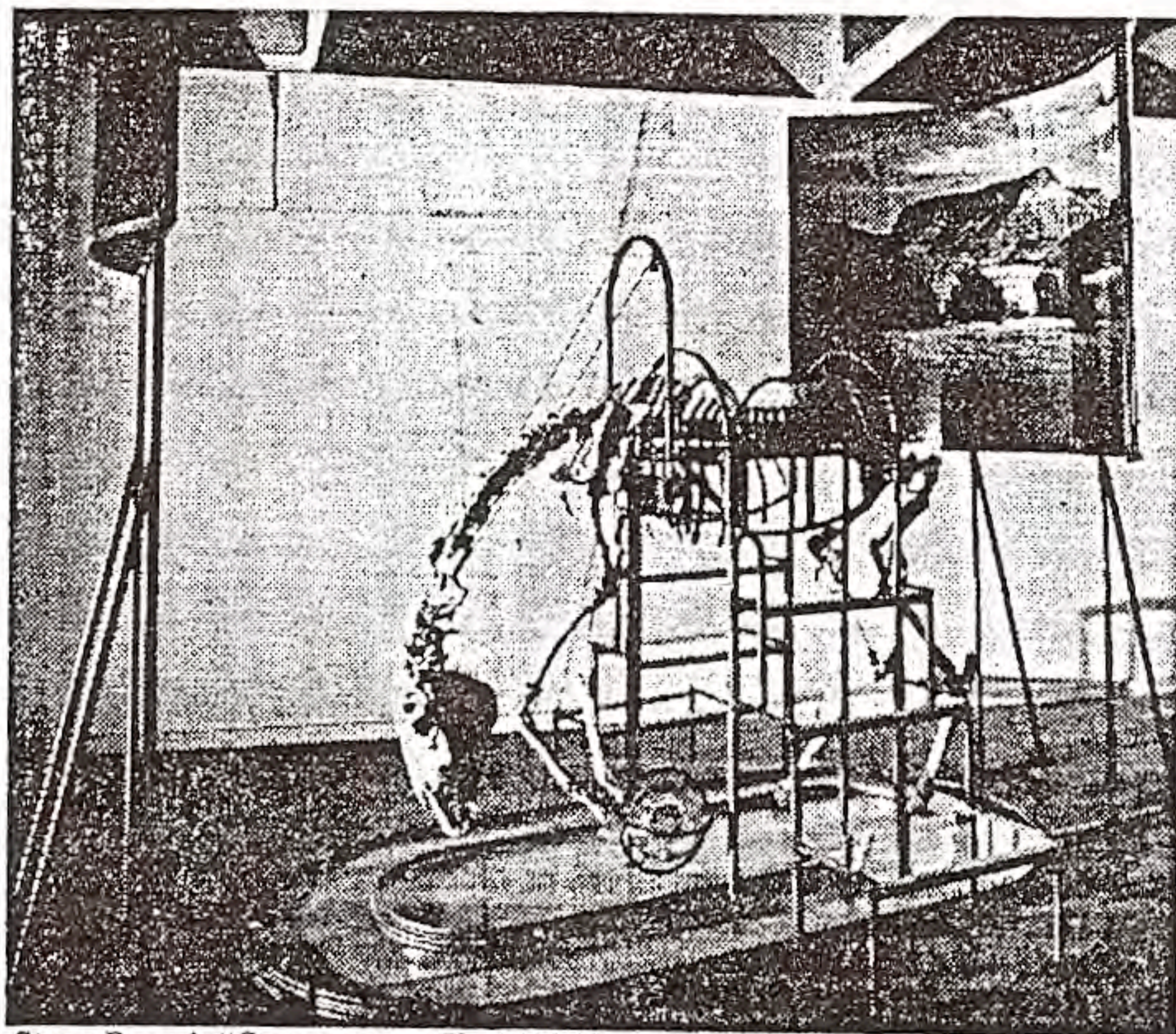
Linguistics and word play are the exclusive game of Indiana artist Kay Rosen, whose unpretentious, sign-like paintings of nonsense words, anagrams and grafted phrases turn out to be witty and endearing, if not profound.

Far more serious are the dark, seemingly wounded semiabstractions by the Cuban-born Miami painter Carlos Alfonso, who died last year of AIDS, and to whom this show is dedicated. In a mutually reinforcing pairing, typical of this show, they hang not far from Peta Coyne's huge, dramatic organlike forms made from wire mesh and black sand. Walking among them, one feels a bit like a midget afloat in the alimentary canal.

Given his position as the show's youngest artist, 29-year-old Leibowitz, from Boston, may perhaps be forgiven for the sophomoric language that caused the Hirshhorn to issue its 2-inch-by-6-inch caveat. Leibowitz, who is gay, quite deliberately set out to create a room that tells of the misery of his teenage years, and of the self-hate and the pain he suffered as a homosexual teenager. "Life Sucks," "Misery Rules," say the banners on his walls, "Loser Line Forms Here," says a large floor mat. Skip it if facts offend you, but the piece is a consciousness-raiser.

The sheer variety of approaches in this group is underscored in the work of painter James Hayward of California, whose grid of monochromatic canvases is covered with nothing more than thick, lush brushstrokes of intense, saturated color (oil paint mixed with wax). Hayward says there is currently a bill in Congress to ban such paints as an environmental hazard: He says he will use his \$15,000 AVA grant to buy up all he can.

A very different view of the need for environmental protection is pre-



Steve Barry's "Conservator (The Fifth Horse)" from 1991.

sented in the participatory sculpture by New Mexico artists Steve Barry, whose climb-aboard contraption—built from a wild horse skeleton—means to suggest that human life is short, the Earth's long. He's beaten this drum before, including at last year's International Sculpture Conference here. It's time for a change.

The AVA award program, apart from delivering \$15,000 cash to each of the 10 award winners, also delivers \$10,000 in purchase funds to each museum on the tour, meant to be used to acquire a work by one or more of the prizewinners. Hirshhorn Director Jim Demettrion's selection was a painting (not in the show) by Puerto Rican painter Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, now a resident of Chicago.

Highly expressionistic in rendering, Roche-Rabell's essentially figurative works are the result of real encounters made by wrapping his models or—in the case of "For the Record: 11th Commandment," his mother—in canvas and taking an impression of the body before further painting the wrapped surface. Simi-

larly, when images of leaves appear—as they often do—they come from real leaves that have been covered with paint and then transferred to the canvas by rubbing or rolling.

It's all an attempt to merge himself totally with his subject matter, to eliminate the space between them, says Roche-Rabell. In my view, he goes one step too far in trying to show his own face looming through the painted image, but, fortunately, these intended double-images are barely discernible.

Two more unlike artists complete this show. Piper, formerly of Washington and now a professor of philosophy at Wellesley College, takes a tough stance on racism, about which more will be heard when her solo shows open later this month at the Hirshhorn and WPA. Brooklyn artist Jessica Stockholder makes free-standing assemblages out of old chairs, newspapers, yarn, mops and light bulbs that, to be sure, look like nothing else, but their significance escaped me.

The works in the show were selected by an extraordinarily cumber-

some but democratic system in which this year, as in the nine previous years, 100 art professionals from all over the country were invited to nominate five artists each from their regions who they felt deserved wider exposure.

Each of the 500 nominated artists was then asked to submit 10 slides, and a jury of five artists, curators and critics was asked to view the 5,000 slides and select 10 winners, one from each region. "Basically it's saying that there are artists worthy of recognition working in every state in the country," says SECCA Director Ted Potter, "and that 20 to 30 powerful New York dealers don't necessarily tell this country what's art and who makes it."

For AVA's purposes, the country is divided into 10 regions according to density of artist population. Manhattan is one region and gets only one artist, as does Area 4, which includes—in addition to Washington, D.C.—Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina. Piper, who lived in Washington at the time, represents Area 4 in the show.

It is surely pure chance that the show hangs together so well when its 10 artists have nothing more in common than that they rose to the top of the same heap. The Hirshhorn, however, did more than its bit in making it all look so terrific. The long-awaited new floor and urgently needed new lights have a lot to do with it, but so, apparently, does the Hirshhorn's bright young curator Amanda Cruz, who not only helped with the installation but also served as one of the five jurors. This selection, she says, truly reflects the art world as it is today.

Tonight at 6:30, the artists will be present in the Hirshhorn Auditorium for a free panel discussion of their work. The show will continue through Sept. 2; it will then travel to the Albuquerque Museum of Art, History and Science, and to the Toledo Museum of Art in December. An abridged version will be shown next spring at the BMW Gallery in New York.