

Art: 'Habitats,' a Show By 21 at the Clocktower

By GRACE GLUECK

THE region where a plant or animal normally grows or lives" is the definition given by one respectable word source, the New World Dictionary of the American Language, for "habitat," or, more tersely, "the place where a person or thing is ordinarily found." A much looser interpretation is made by "Habitats," the current show at the Clocktower, 108 Leonard Street (through April 9). Here the word has been stretched to fit the work of 21 artists and architects exploring "the concepts of volume, enclosures, interiors and fantasy."

Right away, we're off in all directions. The ambitious hodgepodge assembled by Robert Littman, director of New York University's Grey Art Gallery, ranges from a pristine, open cubic structure by Sol LeWitt to a wearable torso "cage" of rattan and bamboo by a fashion designer, Issey Miyake. Mixing models by the architects Frank Gehry and John Hejduk, a proposal for a street sculpture by Mary Miss, panels of an etched-glass screen by Patsy Norvell and one of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt's kitschy "shrines" of tinsel and Baggies, the show is a free-for-all, low on organizing principle. There are, for example, some artists patently missing who work in this vein, among them Alice Aycock, Scott Burton and Alice Adams. But why grumble? Scatter-shot though it is, the show has enough good material to carry it.

The architects here — Mr. Gehry and Mr. Hejduk — are known for their leanings toward the sculptural, though they contribute only modest proposals for quirky houses. Then there are sculptors who incline toward the architectural — including Mr. LeWitt, Siah Armajani, Richard Artschwager (more on him later), Jackie Ferrara, Gavrilo Fonseca, Cletus Johnson, Mary Miss and Charles Simonds. Among their work, the stand-outs are Mr. Johnson's "Beauregard," a shallow wall model of a grandly columned theater lobby invaded by two crocodiles; Mr. Simonds's "Tower and Wells," paying homage to an ancient culture through a tabletop archeological structure of tiny red clay bricks, and Miss Ferrara's "Wall Yard," a tiny, elegantly wrought wooden platform whose geometric motifs are repeated in a wall at right angles to it.

But Mary Miss is badly represented by a photograph of her model for a large-scale sculpture proposed for 42d Street between Ninth and 10th Avenues, with no explanation of its siting or intent. And three prints by Richard Artschwager barely begin to suggest his funny ways with furniture in the round. As for the talented Mr. Armajani, perhaps his wee model for a set of four offices that resemble outdoor beach cabanas was the only thing available, since he's having a show of his own elsewhere. Still, however, buried within this exhibition is the potential for one of more depth and cohesion, confined to sculptors and architects who cross over into one another's disciplines.

Among works of freer association to the theme, Marc Balet's very theatrical fantasy piece, "The Room Above the Pool," deserves special mention. It tells the tale of a man who has fallen to his death in a swimming pool from a house perched high above it, with the pool and the house on a cliff ingeniously depicted in a single structure of miniature scale. A small piece of text outlines the bitter story, and in three accompanying photographs, the structure is blown up to operatic proportions. It's a real stopper. A selection of Sandy Skoglund's cleverly photographed tableaux of people in rooms beset by invasions of goldfish, cats and wire hangers makes another arresting entry.

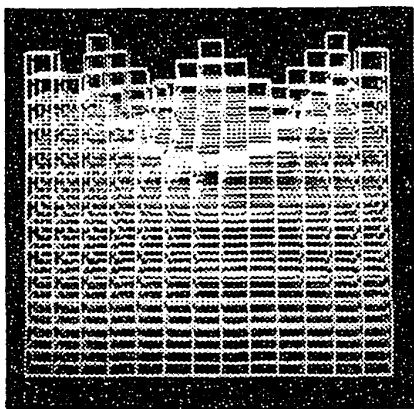
To help make this show as browsable as Bloomingdale's, there are also the talents of Marianne van Lent, Bruce Monteith, David Deutsch, Barbara Hurston, Raphael Ferrer and Michael Kasten. The Clocktower, a creature of the not-for-profit Institute for Art and Urban Resources, which also runs P.S. 1 in Queens, is open Wednesdays through Fridays from 1 to 6 P.M. and Saturdays from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M.

Also of interest this week:

"Big American Figure Drawings" (Visual Arts Museum, School of Visual Arts, 209 East 23d Street): Some of the scene's hottest names appear in this small show of painters and sculptors who render the figure, organized by Jeanne Siegel, an art critic and head of the fine arts and art history department at the School of Visual Arts. In scale and drama, most of the contributions are dwarfed by Robert Longo's huge "House Helmet," a movie-screen-size composition of a frowning woman in a red T-shirt (the color is new for Mr. Longo). She's seen in an interior, her black hair dissolving into an intense black ground that suggests the ceiling pushing down on her; the whole work, in fact, reeks of the pressure and angst that Mr. Longo is good at conveying.

Julian Schnabel's contributions complement each other: one a sketchy study in blue paint of a classic School of Paris nude wearing a classic blue-feathered hat; the other, a large rambling work called "Pregnant Drawing," whose very varied color surface is laid down on an old map. In a top horizontal panel, a blob that could be a baby waves its arms, attended by what could be a cross. In the bottom vertical panel, to which it connects, we see a vague biomorphic shape that has both male and female aspects; in one corner floats a tadpolelike form, or is it the viewer's imagination? Evocative, without being too explicit, this work has a certain wholesome charm.

David Salle is up to his usual tricks; the more typical of his works here is informed by the free-associative



"13/7," painted wood, by Sol LeWitt at the Clocktower

"layering" familiar to Salle fans — a nude sculpture upside down, over it sketched a kitschy bright-blue living-room interior; over that, in bright orange, a girl's face. Well, it's vintage Salle.

There's a lot less flash but more elegance to a small, intense black stick figure by the sculptor Joel Shapiro, poignantly balanced on a white ground and attended by ghostly charcoal trackings. Black and white is also the province of Chris Wool, a young talent who draws strong limblike elements surrounded by other, less decisive markings, which are erased, defaced and partly whited over. Truly Stygian are Troy Brauntuch's two photography-haunted contributions; one, a diptych, depicting sculptured heads and bodies barely discernible in the gloom.

With David Salle's, the least interesting work here is that of Paul Waldman, whose slick female body parts are contained by geometric perimeters in big, washy fields of blue. All in all, if the show proves anything, it's that despite what's said about them, big-time painters and sculptors can draw, too. But this small look at their work has its rewards. (Through March 24.)

Richard Artschwager (Mary Boone Gallery, 417 West Broadway): A kind of mini Artschwager retrospective, this show covers 20 years of painting and a number of this nimble artist's subversive modes, from "Tract Home" of 1964, a forlorn development house done in the style of a real estate brochure, to a recent elegant still life of peaches in fudgy Xerox tones, with one bold pink peach that stands out from its reticent fellows.

Since he's known for his offbeat productions, of superbly tacky "modren" furniture, and the trail of painted lozenges known as "blips" that he's laid down in cities across the world, it shouldn't surprise us that in Richard Artschwager's painting — done in black and white and a corporate kind of gray — he tends to dig into subject matter that other artists let lie. Who else, for instance, would limn a series of ratholes, paint a still life of limp envelopes lying in a gray void or depict a piece of basket weaving very close up — and what's more, bring them off as works that pluck at our attention? He can even make visual jokes about philosophy, as in "The Organ of Cause and Effect," a strange treelike creation that is stood on its head to effect a double image, the line of joining emphasized by a Plexiglas divider affixed to the middle of the long vertical painting.

Much of Mr. Artschwager's compositions are done on Celotex, a nubby gypsum wallboard, presumably used to give a "painterly" effect. He works the surface for all it's worth, often using a circular stroke that resembles fingerprint whorls, employing it, for example, to blur the exquisite details of one of the elegant, 18th-century interiors that he's fond of doing. And then there's the very van Goghish effect he creates with the whorls in a work called "Left Pinch," a cliché mountain-and-skyscape extended by a mirror set into the left side of its deep frame.

Should we forgive Mr. Artschwager for using painting to make sport of painting — knocking its clichés, inverting its subject matter and stripping it of sensuous appeal? Yes, as long as he goes on doing it and clones no disciples. Two Artschwagers would be one too many. (Through March 26.)

Cabaret Singer: Rupert Holmes

WITH their clever word play, urbane sensibility, and expert musical craft, Rupert Holmes's best songs connect Broadway and Tin Pan Alley with contemporary pop-rock in a way that suggests that these musical cultures are not mutually exclusive. At Dangerfield's, where he opened a two-week engagement on Monday, Mr. Holmes has mounted an engaging program of his lighter songs.

Mr. Holmes has been called "the thinking man's Barry Manilow" because of a superficial resemblance in vocal timbre. But in person the two are entirely different personalities. An amusing raconteur who quotes Oscar Wilde and W.C. Fields, Mr. Holmes extends his witty conversational style to his own materials. It is a sensible approach, since his range and vocal projection are decidedly limited.

At Wednesday's early show, Mr. Holmes's amusing patter and understated singing flowed together into a pleasant evening of sophisticated entertainment. In his goofier songs Mr. Holmes pointedly stressed the satirical edges that make them something more than the jingles they resemble. But his more contemplative songs have the poignancy, as well as the wit, of Rodgers and Hart.

Stephen Holden