

ARTS & LEISURE



Seattle Arts Commission

Evening Spirits of a Nearby Village is Kimberly Harter's contribution to an exhibit of art that tells stories; at the Newmark Building.

The people's art

Visual Art: *Twenty-one years after 1 Percent for Art was born, the taxpayers get to see what their money has bought. By Sheila Farr*

There must be something delicious in discontent, because *everybody* loves to gripe about public art. Artists complain when it's not their work that gets purchased. Critics complain that artworks are chosen for a public that has bad taste or none at all. Some members of the public find public artworks pompous, impossible to

Eyes on Public Art: Portable Works, Points of View
several locations
through September 5

understand, ugly, or even immoral. Then there are others who welcome public art in general, but have a few particular examples that they keep as pet peeves to trot out at appropriate moments and disparage mercilessly.

All this grumbling has not slowed the city's 1 Percent for Art program. Since its inception in 1973, with funds allocated from the city's capital-improvement budget, the program has made possible the purchase of about 1,700 works. The premise for the program, stated in the 1 Percent for Art Ordinance, is that "art has enabled people in all societies to better understand their communities and individual lives." Seattle Arts

Commission members who pioneered the program decided that the city collection shouldn't attempt to compete with the historical focus of museums, but should aim to recognize developing talents.

Where is all that art? During the 21 years of the 1 Percent for Art program, the majority of the "public" art—the city's portable-works collection, now numbering about 1,500 pieces—hasn't been public at all.

A few pieces make the rounds of the Opera House, Intiman Theater, the Convention Center, and the public reception areas of city-owned buildings. Most of the works, however, wend their ways through the offices and corridors of City Light and other city businesses in a sort of lending library-style rotation. Periodically, employees flip through slides of the collection and put in their requests for artworks, which are installed every 18 months. So unless you are a city employee, most of the collection is probably a mystery.

But wait. "Eyes on Public Art: Portable Works, Points of View," which opened last week at six locations around the city, aims to rectify the unnatural privacy of Seattle's public-art collection. Eight thematic exhibits showcase some 250 pieces. With themes ranging from abstraction to dog art to documentary, the exhibits may help staunch the flow of complaints about

where the taxpayers' art dollars are being spent. The exhibits are thoughtfully selected and varied, and the work looks good.

The shows are scattered around the city, with three core exhibits installed at the Seattle Center Pavilion: a selection of abstract art curated by Matthew Kangas; a show dealing with special issues chosen by Beth Sellars, curator for the Cheney Cowles Museum in Spokane; and a presentation of proposals for new on-site works for the Seattle Center, assembled by Barbara Goldstein, public-art program manager.

Kangas' decision to feature abstract art in his portion of "Eyes on Public Art" is no surprise. A lot of the work he picked is the stuff he cut his critical teeth on in the 1970s and early '80s. The show leans heavily toward the light-struck lines and grids of such artists as Francis Celentano, William Hoppe, Jeffrey Bishop, Paul Heald, and John Edwards-Rajanen, whose systematic but emotional abstractions Kangas championed at the time. The most attention to an individual artist goes to the abstract expressionist William Ivey. Three of Ivey's large, strongly composed, primary-colored canvases fill one wall of the gallery. The oldest piece in the show, and the most figurative, is a 1950 Walter Isaacs called *Riders in the Desert*. Although out

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of keeping with the city policy to buy the work of living artists (Isaacs died in 1964), the piece adds a nice counterpoint to the later work in the show. Isaacs, a teacher and the first dean of the art school at the University of Washington, influenced many of the younger artists in the region.

The show feels vaguely nostalgic, perhaps because it brings back the days when the building was the Seattle Art Museum's Modern Art Pavilion. Or it may be because the work of many of the artists in the show has changed, developing or declining, stagnating or heading in a different direction. Or it could be because of the recent deaths of two of the artists: William Ivey and John Cage. Whatever the reason, that sense of wistfulness enhances the show. When these works were purchased, they were a cross-section of the contemporary scene. Now they read like a page from an earlier chapter in Seattle art.

Across the Pavilion, in the East Gallery, the emphasis on light and color fades, the sense of temporality diminishes, and all attention focuses on space. Sellars' exhibit, "Spatial Flux: A Means of Expression," creates an intriguingly different view of the city collection, even though some artists—Robert Maki, Paul Heald, and John Cage—overlap with Kangas' selection. There is almost no color in the gallery: the work is mostly black-and-white and metal—nothing to distract from the illusion or reality of dimension in space. In some cases, Sellars creates illusion by juxtaposing two- and three-dimensional works that portray the same perspective. The work was chosen from slides, and Sellars says that in a few cases she was fooled, ending up with a flat piece she thought was three-dimensional, or vice versa. It isn't surprising, since several of the drawings she chose were by sculp-



Mark Selcuk Onat's *Deals!* is in the landscape show at the Sacred Circle Gallery.

tors Robert Maki and Richard Serra, who obviously were working out three-dimensional concepts on paper.

The only big flash of color in the gallery is a huge and provocative yellow wall sculpture that careens out into the room. *Hanging Fruit* by Claudia Fitch is a strange blend of industrial and organic form that provokes all kinds of associations. Extending along and out from the wall, the piece culminates in an ovoid "fruit." Despite its industrial materials, the work seems sensual, almost anatomical. It was acquired recently through an artist grant from the Seattle Art Commission and is being shown for the first time.

The work in the center galleries looks to the future of the city collection. Barbara Goldstein assembled a group of proposals for on-site works to be installed as part of the Seattle Center renovations. The exhibit includes a proposal by California artist Sheldon Brown for a 60-foot *Video Wall*. The \$175,000 project was recently approved by the Arts Commission for installation at the Coliseum. Goldstein's presentation also includes an interactive computer kiosk that gives viewers instant access to images of

the city's permanent on-site works.

Touring the three exhibits at the Seattle Center Pavilion provides more than enough art for one day. But don't skip the other exhibits. Plan an afternoon drive to the Daybreak Star Cultural Center at Discovery Park and another day for a stroll through the downtown shows. You won't want to miss the fun of the dog and pony art in the Bon Marché display windows, with paintings such as Gaylen Hansen's *While a Lady Swings*, *Three Dogs Pass By*, *One Stepping on a Tulip*. A narrative work by some of the Northwest's best-loved painters shows at the Newark Building at Second and Pike. See paintings by Guy Anderson, Jacob Lawrence, Fay Jones, Michael Spafford, and many more.

For inveterate complainers about public art, a special exhibit will be installed for Bumbershoot, next to the exhibit of banned books. "Contention Corridor" will present the 25 artworks found most objectionable by city employees. Don't miss it. Afterwards the works go back to the dungeon.■

Shiela Farr writes about visual arts from her home in Bellingham.

Where to see it

Landscape/Environment: Paintings, Photographs, and Mixed Media, curated by Steve Charles. Wed-Sat 10am-5, Sun noon-5 at the Sacred Circle Gallery (Daybreak Star Cultural Center, Discovery Park).

Abstract Art in the Seattle Arts Commission Portable Works Collection, curated by Matthew Kangas. Tues-Sat 11am-6 and throughout Labor Day weekend in the West Gallery at the Seattle Center Pavilion.

Visions of Seattle Center, curated by Barbara Goldstein. Tues-Sat 11am-6 and throughout Labor Day weekend in the Center Gallery at the Seattle Center Pavilion.

Spatial Flux: A Means of Expression, curated by Beth Sellars. Tues-Sat 11am-6 and throughout Labor Day weekend in the East Gallery at the Seattle Center Pavilion.

SAC Project: Telling Stories: Looking for Narrative, curated by John Boylan. Tues-Sat, noon-5 at the Newmark Building, Second and Pike.

The Dog and Pony Show, curated by Sparky, Canine Curator. Visible at all hours in the Bon Marché display windows (Fourth and Pine).

Private Moments in a Public Collection: Snapshots, Mementos, and Documents, curated by Barbara Earl Thomas. Mon-Fri 7am-7 in the Fourth Avenue Lobby at 1001 Fourth Avenue Plaza.

Seeing Washington: Photographic Perspectives, curated by Margery Aronson. Mon-Fri 7am-7 and Sat 8am-3 at the Norton Building (Second and Columbia).

Several discussions, tours, and workshops are also in the offing; for information call the Seattle Arts Commission at 684-7171.

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