A Variety of Works in 'Pursuit of Likeness'

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Roslyn Harbor

The celebration of all things natural was an indicative trend of the last decade and one that threatens to continue unabated into the 80's. Perhaps in an effort to give this trend a cultural dimension, the Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts is presenting an exhibition — "Contemporary Naturalism: Works of the 1970's" — to supplement our taste for natural breakfast cereal, natural shampoo and natural yogurt.

Just as it is difficult to discover the difference between the newly labeled "natural" beer and the good old brew we've been ignorantly consuming for centuries, it is hard to see why the works of art in this show should have been given a new tag, when "realism" has served with equal imprecision for more than 100 years.

Of course, it is legitimate to argue that the contemporary revivals of this trend needs a new label, since realism has long been so diversified, and often so little concerned with the actualities of the observable world, that it hardly constitutes a style or movement. Yet, what we see in this show of so-called naturalism is that same diversity of technique and viewpoints.

In his introduction to the catalogue, the critic Lawrence Alloway resorts to a dictionary definition of the term, characterizing naturalism in art as the "treatment of forms, colors, et cetera, as they appear or might appear in nature." Asserting that the exhibition's theme is the "pursuit of likeness."

This argument is sound enough in the abstract; however, the works on view declare the application of that definition to be rather misguided, for many of the artists seem less interested in likeness than in various other esthetic, subjective, formal, technical and non-naturalistic concerns.

Take, for example, "Parallels," the highly evocative nude study by Joan Semmel, in which a fragment of a reclining figure, treated realistically, is foiled against an abstracted and painterly enlargement of the same subject. The work clearly illustrates the dichotomy between representation and expression and the difficulty of an artist's coming to terms with canvas and paint as media of expression. Like Miss Semmel, few artists in this show are satisfied with mere naturalism as Mr. Alloway defines it.

Indeed, the show's chief virtue is that it includes an admirably varied collection of works, some naturalistic and many not. The precise and delicately rendered landscapes of Michael Fuchs and Catherine Murphy probably come closest to fitting the definition, but "Athabasca," Stephen Woodburn's strangely dislocated mountain peak, with its unnatural shifts of space and volume, is patently abstracted, in spite of its wealth of realistic detail.

In the same way, the exquisite and detached portrait of a girl by Aaron Shikler stands in sharp contrast to Alice Neel's harsh, distorted and deeply felt studies, for Miss Neel's view of reality is uniquely her own, and is often sharply at variance with what we might call the superficial qualities visible in her sitters.

The still-life subject has long been a favorite of both realists and abstrac-

'Parallels,' by Joan Semmel, at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts Museum in Roslyn.