

# A Variety of Works in 'Pursuit of Likeness'

BY HELEN A. HARRISON

**T**HE celebration of all things natural was an indicative trend of the last decade and one that threatens to continue unabated into the 90'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 revival 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 foisted 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 communication. 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



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

it includes an admirably varied collection of works, some naturalistic and many not. The precise and delicately rendered landscapes of Michael Filmus 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 has long been a favorite subject of both realists and abstrac-

tionists because of its neutrality, lacking the emotive content of the figure and the dramatic possibilities of landscape. There is a fair sampling of highly objective work, such as Nancy Hagin's close study of cactus and Maxwell Hendler's "Heart Knows," a tiny watercolor of immaculate execution and undeniable fascination. But, in this category too, we see that pure representation is far from the minds of many of the artists.

Although Janet Fish obviously uses photographs to organize her still lifes, her real subject is reflected and refracted light. Yet even in this, she un-naturally heightens the effect of light on objects through vivid coloration, creating brilliant, jewel-like compositions that are almost expressionistic in their intensity, but are held in check by their obvious references to the serene, hermetic arena of the table top. As Miss Semmel does, Miss Fish recognizes and exploits the essential contradictions between the realms of art and life.

A similar multiplicity of concerns is evident in the sculpture, which runs the gamut from the smooth, conventional nudes of Robert Graham to a roughly carved plaster figure by Manuel Neri, with its brutal forms implying destructive mutilation rather than creation. There is a ritual quality about Robert White's mesmerized "Dancers," and Leonard Baskin's "Isaac" symbolizes the patriarch rather than representing any particular personage.

In short, although this exhibition presents an admirable selection of works based on legible images of people, places and things, it fails to give us fresh insights into the artist's motivations for choosing this context, or why there are so many variations within this basic framework. By seeking to lump together and pigeonhole an extremely and happily diverse selection of styles and approaches, it also fails to establish convincingly a common denominator of naturalism. Unfortunately for critics and historians, we must concede that the artists have once again proved difficult, if not impossible, to master.

The exhibition, which inaugurates the museum's newly renovated facilities, will be on view through Aug. 24. The museum is off Northern Boulevard, and is open Tuesdays through Fridays from 10 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. and Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 5 P.M. Admission is free.