Big Names in the Recycling Game Coax Poetry From Debris

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O RTHODICTIVE is the word that comes most often to mind while viewing "Discarded" at the Rockland Center for the Arts here. This is a varied exhibition featuring many big names in the recycling game as well as several not so well known. What stands out among all of them is how driven they are to coax poetry out of the unlovly.

On the lawn outside the center are two works by an artist who goes by the single name Kalmia. The sculptures have a ragtag look, being principally made of braided fabric. But they also have a seemingly realistic aspect.

Apples, which look as if they belong in this setting but appear nowhere else on the lawn, are heaped in the immediate vicinity of these pieces, and the evoking of discarded organic nature is bracing.

Inside, Kalmia has two flat mosaic-like pieces called "Coney Island" and "Far Rockaway," which are surely made of embedded debris from each of the named places.

Some of Ernest Acker-Gherardino's crumpled metal pieces hang little, but the center, but those that are "Cape," hanging inside. This is a section of rusted corrugated sheet metal that resembles a cloak. In another material, "Tile" is also lacquered. It seems to be simply a salvaged section of tiles in the shape of sections of chicken wire.

Wire supports are important to two other artists, Mattie Bergh and Mattie Bergh, furthering the idea of "Drawing in Space" advanced by David Smith, and in a written statement he acknowledges his influence as well as that of Giacometti, Julio Gonzalez, and Jean Tinguely. The simple wire grid — it looks like fencing wire — acts as a support for a diverse array of fragments, all of which further a sense of likeness and suspension.

The other artist exploiting wire is Richard Tuttle, and the publicity advances him as "the most human of the minimalist." Mr. Tuttle has always walked a fine wire, so to speak, sometimes his pieces consist of so few objects that they seem either to be a window or else they are elaborate pastels that give them an aura of preciousness.

On two pieces on exhibit, both titled "She Re-creates Herself as Scape" (one is No. 3, the other No. 4), the subtle shift in materials gives the pair a tantalizing presence. One is acrylic on homoseat and plywood, the other on canvas. Chicken wire is used in both. Whatever the metaphysical implications of Mr. Tuttle's titles, the notion of re-creation is brought strongly home.

The artists so far discussed are characterized by discernment, other works are hobbled by comparison. My initial reaction was that Judy Pfaff might not belong in this crowd because the mixed media that she uses is too slick, possesses a kind of squeaky newness, which is the opposite of discarded material.

For example, she slices large plastic balls in half and paints them gold and red. "Cape," above, a work in sheet metal by Ernest Acker-Gherardino, and "El Bario de los Artistas," a mixed-media work by Bob Smith.

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that, a braiding of slender black inner tubes, taken along with another of his pieces, one which uses bottle caps bent so that they resemble cowrie shells, we have both a sincere homage to African culture and an acknowledgment that old values rub against technological or consumer culture.

The work of Donald Lipski emphasizes the fact that discarded materials do not have to be down at thebeck. One of his pieces is a new version of one of the ideas that brought him renown in the late '70s: "Garbage Dust." The most ephemeral objects, like rubber bands and broken matchsticks, are hung individually on pins like trophies in a prized butterfly collection. In fact, they are the remnants of our age, which when added up will make a portrait of ourselves.

"Pieced Rice" is a piece in Mr. Lipski's newer mode. He now makes solid objects out of the most incongruous materials: here is what looks like an overturned birdhouse along with a generous heaping of rice and brightly colored paper, pieces that are preserved in something like a cryogenic state. Each piece is like a Station of the Cross in that each reads like an emblem of the precariousness of life in America for blacks.

The political points scored by Harry Landman Uhrig are more '70s ringing. This artist has been allied with the New York City Sanitation Department in conceptual works that explored the body politic through their attitude toward sanitation.

In recent years, tangible works have come out of this alliance, including four "Briquettes" made of compressed aluminum cans that would make luscious-looking ornaments.

The show-stopper is a bed of muck gleaned from subway train wheels. One feels that this scone might be as praiseworthy as it but also that it could sprout new life.

Allan Weissler has attempted to "repair an office so that it looks more interesting than the original," and his conference table looks as if it has seen several mergers, byaddings, and bankruptcies, but it is always poised for another deal. Mr. Weissler's, "Mr. Ship Collars Sewn Into a Tablecloth" fulfills his wish: it's more interesting than either a mere tablecloth or four dress shirts.

The most poignant piece is the group of small houses, the "El Bario de los Artistas" envisioned by Bob Smith, who died last year. Like gingerbread houses, these dwellings are festive, but the sentiment comes not from decorations in icing but from their being studded with wire corks.

There are photographs of artists' friends, like the late Keith Harter, on the houses, and the corks are not only to sorrow — the analogy between wine and blood is an ancient one — but to sadness. In Smith's barrio, there were many nights of serious drinking.

The exhibition continues through Nov. 15. For information, call 388-0677.