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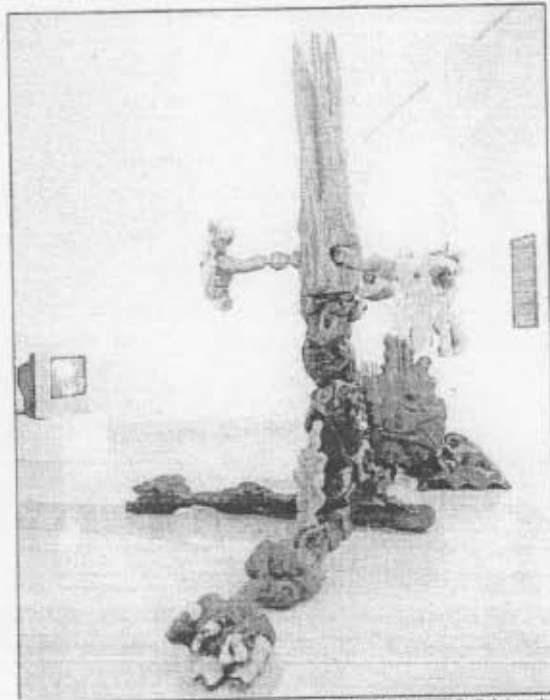
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ENTERTAINMENT



AUGUSTO F. MENZEL/Staff photographer

■ "Widows' Tongues," a painted wood installation by Nancy Azara, is on view at the Mason Gross Galleries in New Brunswick as part of an exhibit on American women artists of the early 1970s.

Postmodern women come to Rutgers

By LAURIE GRANIERI
STAFF WRITER

"I want to accentuate my double chin." Forget dung Madonnas and S&M photos; a woman emphasizing her double chin is radical.

The new exhibit at Rutgers University's Mason Gross Galleries features Martha Wilson's video performances from the early '70s, including the aforementioned "Deformation."

It is a shock to the manicured, waxed and plucked system to see Wilson refuse to put on a pretty face.

"I'm going to show my teeth, which I'm also embarrassed about," she announces calmly, almost clinically. She bares her teeth then adds matter-of-factly: "That's pretty ugly."

"How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism: 1970-1975" features video per-

formance, tapestry, installation, sculpture, collage and painting by a variety of artists, including such seminal figures as June Wayne, Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneeman, Joan Snyder and Faith Ringgold.

When confronting a show that hinges on gender, one is tempted to find the common thread, to mine similarities in theme, approach or subject matter and to artificially collapse 22 women into a "movement," as if they were all in cahoots around someone's kitchen table, trying to figure out how to overthrow the white male art establishment.

But what emerges, upon closer inspection, is the sense of freedom and movement the works exhibit — the boldness, aesthetically and philosophically, as well as the idiosyncratic nature of the work. There is not one holy Art Voice speaking from the mountaintop, decreeing what is Art and what is — shudder to think — craft.

Ringgold's "Slave Rape" series of tapestries feature a variety of fabrics and patterns, some of which would adapt quite well as a set of curtains, infusing the "high" art tapestry with remnants of "women's work"; Miriam Schapiro's bright and bold "Big Ox" abstract painting hews to a minimalist aesthetic.

Joan Semmel's expansive "Antonio and I" and "Woman Under Sheet" oils are bracing in their own way. Though both paintings employ traditional materials, they take on the female nude from a new perspective, literally and figuratively: We see the woman's nude, languid body sprawled on the bed, but we see it from *her* point of view. Her body is no longer a mere object assessed by the male gaze.

It is an intimate scene on an epic scale, the sort of scale used for battle scenes, landscapes and public artworks, the outdoor world seen as the "male" domain.

Of course, this is essentially a retrospective, an historical

look at a critical period. Again, the danger of committing works to the realm of "history" is that they are somehow de-fanged, sacrificing their bite for a place in the high-art pantheon. But co-curator Ferris Olin says, "We're not looking nostalgically; we're celebrating."

We are brought into the bedroom, the kitchen (Martha Rosler's mesmerizing "Semiotics of the Kitchen" video performance), the domestic sphere traditionally perceived as the woman's domain. We are forced to rethink the art object.

Viewers may not be surprised. Personal-narrative videos? Installation? "High" art objects infused with snatches of language and nonart materials? So what? We've seen it before — we're seeing it now, all over the art world.

Exactly, says co-curator Judith Brodsky. The use of decoration, pattern and nonart materials are "new ideas now embedded in contemporary art (that were) practiced across the board" by American women artists in the early '70s. As Postmodernists, they "broke apart the Modernist ideas of the early 20th century. Instead of the white male genius, you have all these different voices that are equal on the art scene."

The word "feminism," which has often been reduced to shorthand for women who emphasize their big teeth and double chins, "is back in," Brodsky proffers. "... We're beginning to understand its intellectual importance as a set of ideas."

"How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism, 1970-1975," 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays, today through Jan. 27, Mason Gross Galleries at Civic Square, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. Free. (732) 932-2222.