

ART

REVIEWS/Helen A. Harrison

Getting in Touch With That Inner El Greco

'El Greco'

Islip Art Museum, 50 Irish Lane, East Islip, (631) 244-5402. Through April 3.

The premise of this show is to compare eight contemporary artists to Domenikos Theotocopoulos, the 16th-century master known as El Greco, because, like him, they supposedly express their "inner vision" in opposition to current trends. The artists were selected by Joy Glidden, founding director of the Dumbo Arts Center in Brooklyn, who had the idea for the exhibition and was apparently inspired by the recent El Greco retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But the concept is a tenuous thread on which to hang an art show.

What are the current trends that these artists defy? Ms. Glidden's catalog essay does not say. Her pronouncement that contemporary art "is the politics of the subconscious and it is an educated battle" is hardly illuminating. Nor does the selection of work illustrate her contention that it represents a challenge to artistic conventions. Duchamp's urinal did that; this show does not.

One artist is indeed inspired by El Greco, but not because both are iconoclasts. Kysa Johnson's chalk drawings use El Greco's paintings of the Immaculate Conception as the compositional framework for renderings of bacteria undergoing asexual reproduction. Stare at them for a while, and the El Greco underpinnings emerge. The images are both literal and metaphoric — clever, subversive confluences of the biblical and the biological.

El Greco's well-known anatomical distortions are somewhat reflected in Fritz Chesnut's portraits of grimacing karaoke singers. But far from expressing the spiritual dimension of ecstatic vision, as the master did, these images are studies in self-absorption and momentary emotional release.

David Schild has a more interesting take on painterly expressiveness. His latex enamel pictures seem to melt within their urethane foam frames, as if someone had trained a blowtorch on them. The effect is both over the top and oddly subtle, leaving nothing but the sensual pleasure of color and texture surrounded by voluptuous form.

'Expo XXIV'

B. J. Spoke Gallery, 299 Main Street, Huntington, (631) 549-5106. Through April 3.

This national juried show was selected this year by David Ebony, an associate managing editor of *Art in America* magazine, and includes work by 10 artists. In 1982, the first Expo featured only three. Having covered all 24 Expos, I can assure you that fewer was better.

Here, with such a large roster, the exhibition is neither a conventional juried show, with one or two works by many artists, nor a real opportunity for a few to display significant bodies of work. This might be less of a problem if the quality was uniform, but there is some work at this gallery that must have looked much better in the slides used for judging than it does on the walls.

In the plus column, Huang Yi Min's series of acrylic paintings on paper combines memory and fantasy in complex amalgams of ancient and modern images. Drawing on recollections of her life in Beijing, the artist creates a fascinating dream world peopled by archetypes, while at the same time referring to specific observations of people, places and things.

Abandoned storm cellars in rural Kansas become gateways to the unknown in Aaron Anderson's deliberately underexposed photographs. Printed on steel, they have a velvety finish that intensifies the mysterious character of the shadowy shelters, which are simultaneously inviting and ominous.

A trip down the rabbit hole might lead to the abandoned power plant, filled with rusting, graffiti-covered turbines and wrecked machinery, that Richard Gilles eulogizes in a series of handsome panoramas. In contrast, Carl Buxbaum's color photographs of oil tanks and other utilitarian structures concentrate on exteriors, emphasizing their formal qualities.

If Jasper Johns had never lived, the artist who styles himself Joroko would have had to invent him, if only to destroy him. Joroko's sculptural relief "Flags and Numbers" paraphrases Johns directly, without apology. "5W30," with its pendant mask rim, padding and dipstick projections annihilates Robert Rauschenberg as well, but more in homage than in anger.

'Poetic Dimensions In the Modern Still Life'

Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra Museum, Hempstead, (516) 463-5672. Through May 8.

Still life may be the most prosaic genre of painting. A few common objects, usually arranged on a tabletop, are all it comprises. How could it be poetic? But look at a Manet vase of flowers or a Morandi grouping of bottles, and you have your answer.

Not everything in this large and diverse group show lives up to the ideal of the title. But in this postmodern era, the definition of poetry is elastic enough to encompass everything from the quotidian to the transcendent.

In the latter camp, Ying Li's "Skull" takes the traditional *vanitas* into uncharted territory. The object itself is virtually sub-



ON VIEW Joroko's mixed-media piece "5W30," above, at B. J. Spoke Gallery in Huntington; David Schild's untitled painting, right, at the Islip Art Museum; and Lucy Barber's still life "Red Cup and Swallows," at Hofstra Museum in Hempstead.



merged in a sea of sculptural pigment, coalescing more in the mind's eye than in physical form. Here is an inner reality that amply fulfills the poetic criterion. So does Langdon Quin's "Still Life With Senses," a visual allegory that uses fragments of classical sculpture to represent intangible perceptions.

Like Mr. Quin, several of the painters engage in a balancing act between representation and abstraction. Bevin Engman, for example, makes complex structures of solid and translucent elements that interact in implied space, yet could easily be seen as geometric exercises. Their fragile equilibrium creates pictorial tension that elevates them above straightforward observation. In Robert Jessel's lively tableaux, imaginary space is populated by expressionistically animated objects, some recognizable and others purely imaginary.

Lucy Barber's "Red Cup and Swallows," a delicately rendered study of a pear and a flower foiled against a rolling Tuscan landscape, plays with motifs that have inspired many a poet, while Lennart Anderson manages to elevate a few unprepossessing vegetables to lyric status. It may be easy to write an ode on a Grecian urn, but it is no mean feat to wax poetic over a few skeletal flowers in a chalky vase, as Barbara Goodstein does in "Asymmetrical Arrangement." ■