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ART / THEATER

Arts Complex opens with 'Overflow Show'

By BILL VAN SICLEN
Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

PROVIDENCE — Like a wily real estate agent trying to dazzle a potential buyer, Umberto Crenca ticks off a long list of pricey home improvements: new roof, new floors, new plumbing, new windows (insulated, of course), new

electrical wiring and a new fire-alarm system.

But Crenca isn't selling a house. Instead the founder and artistic director of AS220, the downtown art and performance center, is reciting some of the many renovations and improvements that have been made at AS220's new home at 95-121 Em-

pire Street over the past six months.

The facility, which is tentatively known as the AS220 Complex and which is also home to Perishable Theatre and the Groundwex Dance Theatre, will hold its grand opening on Sunday from 1-6 p.m.

"A lot of work went into making this happen," says Crenca who has guided AS220 since its founding in 1985. "Six months ago if you'd asked anybody, including myself, if we'd have this place ready by February they probably would have laughed at you. Now we're almost finished."

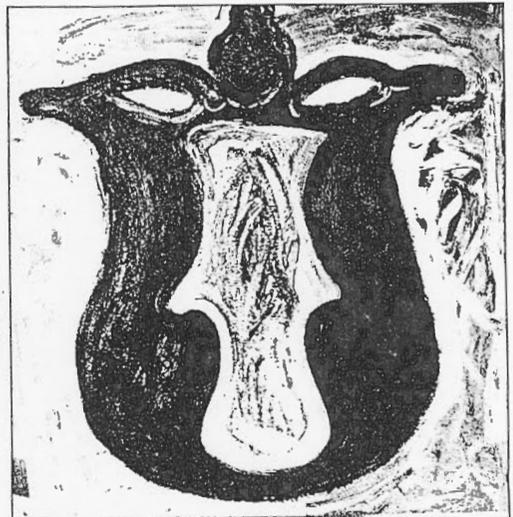
In addition to office and exhibition space for AS220, the new building features 23 artist's studios, 12 of which have been designed as live-in apartments. A 75-seat theater, a rehearsal room for Groundwex Dance Theatre and a recording studio are still under construction.

"This is going to be beautiful," says Crenca. "Most people think artists work best when they're alone. But artists also need the kind of dialogue and friendly criticism and support that they get from interacting with other artists. That's the kind of thing we can offer here."

Work on the project began last summer when a group of local banks approved a loan of \$530,000 to renovate a three-story commercial building at 95-115 Empire St. Additional money has come from the City of Providence, which has contributed \$205,000 in low-interest loans to the project, and from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, which has kicked in \$40,000. AS220's own fundraising efforts have brought in another \$300,000.

Sunday's festivities begin at 1 p.m. with food and refreshments in the AS220 cafe. Formal ceremonies start at 2 p.m. with speeches by Crenca, Providence Mayor Vincent A. Cianci and Perishable Theatre director Mark Lerman. From 3 to 6 p.m. the building will be open to visitors.

An added attraction is *The Overflow Show*, an exhibition of more than 125 works by Rhode Island artists opening today at AS220. The show is being held in conjunction with another exhibition, *Contemporary Art in Rhode Island*, at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.



UNTITLED, by Francis Hugot, is also part of AS220's "The Overflow Show," being held in conjunction with *Contemporary Art in Rhode Island*, at the Museum of Art, RISD.

R.I. artists full of surprises at RISD

Continued from the cover

other art works by more than 150 artists. The contributors range from twentysomethings such as textile designer Natalie Darmohraj and painter Maureen O'Neill Elliott to John Stephan, an 87-year-old Newport artist whose life spans most of the history of modern art.

Stylistically, the two shows offer everything from the traditional to the avant garde, from soothing landscapes that look like they were painted in the 19th century to cutting-edge sculptures that look like they just dropped in from outer space. If you can't find something to like in these two shows it's probably time to start thinking about an eye exam.

Let's begin with the RISD Museum, since it's here that both the RISD and AS220 shows have their artistic roots. Two years ago, the museum's curatorial staff decided to organize a juried exhibition of contemporary Rhode Island art. The idea was to celebrate the opening of the museum's new Daphne Farago Wing, which is dedicated to contemporary art, and to showcase the best work being made by local artists, craftsmen and designers.

To insure that the judging was fair and impartial, the museum assembled a distinguished panel of out-of-state jurors, including New York gallery owner Paula Cooper and textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen. Of the more than 500 artists who applied, 48 survived the cut.

The result is just about everything you could hope for in a juried exhibition of contemporary art. Called *Contemporary Art in Rhode Island*, the show has enough variety to keep things interesting and enough focus to keep it from seeming formless or overblown. It also has enough surprises to keep even the most jaded local art fans looking and thinking.

One of the biggest surprises is the strength of the show's painting contingent. It's not that Rhode Island has a shortage of talented painters. Far from it. But to find so many of them together in one place at one time is a treat, especially at a time when the larger art world seems to be going through one of its periodic "Painting Is Dead" spasms.

Among the highlights are two huge canvases by John Stephan, a former New Yorker whose

career reaches back to the New Deal art programs of the 1930's. One looks like an updated version of a Monet landscape, with topographical features dissolving into flurries of rich, earthy color. The other painting, which recalls the work of American artist Kenneth Noland, consists of a target-like arrangement of subtly colored concentric circles.

Other standouts include Bobbie Oliver, whose hazy, inkblot-like compositions still manage to glow with smoldering color, and David Frazer, a still-life specialist who uses the genre to ponder the mysteries of both life and art. Also of note are paintings by Holly Hughes, Leslie Bostrom, Nan-

To find so many of Rhode Island's talented artists together in one place at one time is a treat.

cy Friese and Matthew Eliot Kolodziej, as well as a gorgeous study of a female monkey and her child by Cuban-born artist Luis Alonso.

Another surprise, especially for visitors who don't pay much attention to contemporary art, is the increasingly porous boundary (actually it's more like an eight-lane autobahn) between art and craft. On the one hand, you have a painter like Dennis Congdon who builds elaborate home-carpenry supports for his paintings. On the other hand, you have jewelry designers like Joan Ann Parcher, Martina Windels and Donald Friedlich whose brooches and necklaces look like miniature versions of contemporary sculpture.

This dialogue between art and craft can be found even in the show's most ambitious pieces of installation and conceptual art. A good example is *Germ*, a huge glass-and-metal construction by Bruce Chao. Despite its huge size and threatening shape (it looks like a cross between a Sputnik-era satellite and a giant sea urchin), it's a beautifully crafted object.

The same attention to detail can be found in the show's funniest entry — Janet Zweig's *Mind Over Matter*. This hilarious piece consists of a computer printer that has been programmed to create endless variations on three famous egocen-

tric sentences: "I think therefore I am" (Descartes), "I am what I am" (Popeye) and "I think I can, I think I can" (*The Little Engine that Could*). The result is a high-tech Rube Goldberg contraption that spews one-liners like "I think I am what I am" and "I am therefore I can."

About the only problem with *Contemporary Art in Rhode Island* is that it's limited to only 48 artists. Which is where the AS220 show comes in. Called *The Overflow Show* and organized by a group calling itself the *Salon de Refuses* Committee, the exhibition features works by more than 125 artists who were rejected by the RISD jurors.

Given the large number of contributors and the relatively small exhibit spaces available at AS220, it's not surprising that *The Overflow Show* suffers in comparison to *Contemporary Art in Rhode Island*. Some of the pieces barely qualify for "gifted amateur" status, while AS220's two upstairs galleries are so tightly packed that only a few people at a time can walk through them with any degree of comfort.

Still, there is plenty of quality work on display and visitors who spend some time with "The Overflow Show" will find their efforts rewarded. Among the highlights are paintings by Wendy Edwards, Penelope Manzella and Sharon Butler, photographs by Denny Moers and Barnaby Evans, and a wonderfully quirky sculpture called *Having to do with Sacrifice* by Walter Chacey.

The sheer variety of works in these two shows makes it difficult to offer any catch-all summary or assessment. But one thing is certain: *The Overflow Show* and *Contemporary Art in Rhode Island* could not have come at a better time. With the state arts council and its One Percent For Art program under fire, the two shows send a resoundingly positive message about the size and quality of the Rhode Island art community.

Hopefully, the people who have been bashing the arts over the past few months will take the time to look and listen.

Contemporary Art in Rhode Island continues through April 24 at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 224 Benefit St. in Providence. Hours are Tue., Wed., Fri., and Sat., 10:30-5, Thu., noon-5 and Sun., 2-5.

The Overflow Show continues through Feb. 24 at the AS220 Complex, 115 Empire St. in Providence. Hours are Tue.-Sun., noon-4.



KEYHOLE, by Wendy Edwards, can be seen at "The Overflow Show," at AS220's new home at 95-121 Empire St., Providence.