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AS220 and RISD go with the (overflow)

by Bill Rodriguez

C onsidering its origins, The Overflow Show at AS220 is a remarkably amicable response to the Contemporary Art in Rhode Island exhibition running concurrently at Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art.

There was a groundswell of grumbling last spring when the RISD curators went out, complaining from artists who eventually didn't get into the show and from one who decided to enter the contest because of how the exhibition was set up. The response by artists was the formation of a Salon des Refuses Committee to organize The Overflow Show. RISD's response was to condemn the initiators of the protest and cooperate to make the second show a success. Publicity and invitations to both openings — to be held simultaneously this evening (February 10) — gave information about each other's show. Buses will shuttle opening night attendants between the Benefit Street exhibition and the one at the AS220 Complex on Empire Street.

Actually, despite the contentious name, cooperation also was a feature of the original Salon des Refuses, formed in 1863. When more than 60 percent of those submitting work to a prominent exhibition were rejected by the French Academy artists, protests led to the emperor designating a secondary show elsewhere in the Paris of the Industry. Work by such present-day luminaries as Cezanne, Picasso and Whistler were displayed in the latter, including the Manet's shocking "Lunchen On The Grass," with nude woman sitting among dressed rose bushes.

This officially sanctioned Overflow Show isn't composed of those whose work is particularly scandalous, though. Reasons for participation, besides getting a second chance to display work, include several objectives to the selection process for the RISD exhibition. A show titled Contemporary Art in Rhode Island indicates an attempt to display work by the best artists in the state. Such a result is impossible, the reason continues, if: 1) there is no admission fee (many, perhaps most, artists with national reputations decline to enter competitions where there are fees); 2) the competition, with jurors knowing only the names of those who submitted up to five slides, is open to students (whose submissions may be impressive but without history of prior significant work); and 3) it's open to non-Rhode Islanders (some in the RISD show teach part-time at the design school but are from Boston and New York).

"I don't do (shows) with entry fees at this stage of my life," said prominent sculptor Richard H. Fleischman, who was invited by the chief curator to enter. Fleischman also declines to enter regional shows, considering such classifications arbitrary.

Photographer David Moors, one of 13 on the Salon des Refuses Committee, was also requested by a curator to enter, which he did. In addition to his objections on the above points, he had a problem with RISD not using its familiarity with the local art scene to make sure that some of the best work was not overlooked.

"I'm not going to say, 'How dare they pick somebody else?'" he remarked. "But I think that based purely on a five-slide application procedure, they're going to miss a lot of very fine work. The nature of the show is to produce the very best work being done."

Daniel Rosenfeld is quite pleased with the RISD show. He stood near the entrance of the new Daphne Parage Wing of the museum and surveyed the space that now held workmen's tools on a long folding table, a gray industrial vac and a long wooden crate addressed to RISD. Dominating the lower space, he described, would be a 12'x12' installation by Bruce Chaof artist and glass piece spiky with architectural T-roots, blown glass triangles glimmering at intervals. Rosenfeld said he appreciated Chaof's varying the use of glass as a precious object "designed for privileged surroundings."

Rosenfeld indicated spots where there will be a couple of large abstract paintings by Newport artist John Stafano, at 89 the oldest artist in show. Near the corridor will be a sculpture and several works on paper by Hawaiian-born Joseph Otto who, Rosenfeld noted with surprise, had died the week before. Walking through the large main gallery, be spoke appreciatively of the large central installation by Evan Morris- wick, that dominated the room. The two semi-circular benches are made from discarded lumber; the piece was made for a homeless shelter in New Haven.

In a noisy wing of the museum, at a fork cluttered with color proofs of the show's catalogue, Rosenfeld spoke about how proud he was of the exhibition. With hisdfsheared black beard and denim shirt accompanying his tie and jacket, he assuredly in a room both artists and administrators can be comfortable with. As curator of Painting and Sculpture at the museum for nine years, he had the main responsibility for putting Contemporary Art in Rhode Island together. The exhibition, which is displaying 46 artists in both fine and applied art, is the first statewide exhibition under RISD auspices since the 1950's. In a state with no public museums, the RISD administrator has come to be especially significant.

Rosenfeld spoke about the controversy over his show.

"There was a lot of hand-wringing about the desirability of doing such an exhibition," he began, referring to discussions within the design school. "There were a lot of people who thought it would create more enemies than friends, who thought it would just polarize the community, that it would make a lot of the faculty or artists generally it would create a lot of friction. But I really felt that the good that would be achieved by organizing an exhibition like this would far outweigh the frustrations and the bad feelings."

Since the preview of his museum, at one of the open small museums in the country, extends to international artists, institutions like the Walker Gallery, the Gallery One and Mara Gallery are more important for local artists, Rosenfeld noted. "We are not going to be able to cover that ground with any consistency in the future," he said. "So the Overflow Show is wonderful!"

Rosenfeld takes the upsets about the exhibition in stride. "The people who feel badly about this show or the fact that they were excluded or the fact that we charged a $25 admission fee or who felt that they didn’t want to subject themselves to a jury because they’re already too important or what have you, well, that all comes with the process."

"My metaphor for the show, and I use it in my (catalogue) essay, is that it’s like a window onto the landscape," he said and fanned his hands toward the nearby view outside. "You look out and you see a very fragmented view of that landscape. Rhode Island is beyond the frame of your window that there is a lot more landscape of equal quality that you don’t see as part of that view. Some of which you’ll see in The Overflow Show."

Rosenfeld considers it a plus that the show was open to students. "The nice thing about this exhibition is that there are a number of quite well established artists and there are also a lot of artists who are very young," he declared. However, as far as he knows, the only one who was a student when he applied was Matthew Kalodinos, who graduated from RISD’s MFA program last year.

When glass artist Howard Ben Ben and sculptor Richard Fleischman were mentioned as two especially prominent Rhode Island artists who are not in the show, Rosenfeld said that such absences are unavoidable. "Howard and Dickie are both artists I spoke to when the call to artists was circulated, and both of them indicated that they didn’t feel it was appropriate to submit their work. And that was a perfectly appropriate decision."

But isn’t the usual procedure for curators to visit their studios and invite work? What about the objection that most artists with national reputations usually refuse to enter those that require admission fees?

"Not in the least. I think that the admission fee is no hindering. Rosenfeld responded. "The admission fee was something that we had prolonged discussion was implemented because of a desire largely to avoid See ART, page 8
UNTITLED by David Clarke, from The Overview Show.

Art

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On what might be the spurious submissions. We had 920-old submissions. If there weren't an admission fee there might have been a thousand or more, and the whole jurying process would become extremely problematic.

A year's family membership to the museum, worth more than the fee, was given to each artist. As for the admission charge being a means to defray the cost of the show, Rosenberg said that the $50,000 bill for the exhibition wasn't decreased at all by the $13,000 or so raised. The catalog alone cost over $50,000, giving each artist $200 to cover the cost of artwork and a color illustration, where appropriate.

Rosenfeld knew from the outset that out-of-state jurors would be necessary for this exhibition, though, as head curator, he normally prefers to make the selections himself for a theme or group show. "That was unfeasible for an exhibition like this. I knew too many artists and I like too many of them, and I have - as anybody who is part of this very small, incestuous environment - real prejudices about which artists I would like to see in the show. And there is no way, given the familiarity that we have with not only the RISD faculty but also the broader artistic community we rub elbows with regularly, that any or any of my colleagues could fairly choose work and call this an exhibition that is open and accessible to everybody.

"The unavoidable politics of working at the Rhode Island School of Design with a very large faculty of distinguished artists made that impossible," he declared.

The upshot of the controversy was that there is a strong collection of work now displayed at AS220. New York cover artist Gretchen Dow-Simpson hung a painting of one of her signature clapboard New England facades. There's a suburban landscape by Bunny Harvey. There are pieces by Al Wunderlich and Jay Coogan, of the RISD faculty, the latter contributing a whimsical wax hat filled with pigeons.

The idea for a supplementary show was in the air last summer, especially when so many artists opened expositions and learned that their work had been turned down. One such discussion was at a dinner party attended by artists Melanie Dupre, Ken Speiser, Bunny Harvey and others. The 19th-century Salon des Refusés was such a prominent part of art history that it was natural for them to adopt its name for a committee to make an alternative show happen. At first the National Guard armory was sought for a location - which would have provided amusing echoes of the 1913 avant-garde Armory Show in New York - but that didn't work out. Fortunately, the new AS220 space had nothing slated for February.

"Shortly after we got organized RISD got wind of what was going on, mostly through David being over there," explained AS220 gallery director Tracy Brown, referring to David Newton, a visual artist who is working on installing both the museum exhibition and The Overview Show. As a museum employee, Newton couldn't enter its show. "They invited us in for a meeting." Brown continued, speaking of us in early January with the museum director, Rosenberg and others, "and said, 'What exactly are you doing and want are the ways we can cooperate?' They were very open. We had a very nice meeting."

Cooperating involved putting information about the AS220 show on the RISD invitations, coordinating with Lucie Sears, board member of the Providence Preservation Society, on plans she had underway for shuttle buses between the shows.

Bert Crence, AS220 founder and executive director, recently sat in the café of their new building, stressing the positive. The alternative arts impresario said he had one major concern from the outset: he insisted that if the arts center was going to be involved, there be no whiff of sour grapes in the air. Crence looked around at the nearly empty walls, which soon would be covered with some of the 150 or so works — only about 100 artists of the 470 "refused" were expected to contribute. The building was still in the midst of renovations, as the February 1st date of the official AS220 opening approaches. The Overview Show will be hung salon-style — that is, in every nook and cranny possible on the three floors of the building.

Crence cited the long history of AS220 and RISD working together (there's a seven-page list of specifics). Which includes students showing their senior theses there and William Yoda, of their architectural design department, doing all the new building's structural engineering for free. If Crence has his way, cross-fertilization between the design school and the arts community will continue to blossom.

"I could see other kinds of shows, and maybe getting involved in more educational stuff," he said. "I know that if the new president, Raget Mendel, has his way RISD will be getting more into performance, so I could see more cross-over with them presenting things here."

Artists need last eggs in order to do what they do as well as they do. But whether it's from pique over being overlooked or objective disagreement over selection procedures, or a combination of both, the civilized tone of this debate has been encouraging.

Working together may very well be the most creative thing all these artists have to show. I feel very good about the show," said Dennis Moore, one of the early critics of how RISD handled their exhibition. "Because any time you can turn around something negative into a positive celebration, you have won."

Contemporary Art in Rhode Island will be exhibited at the Rhode Island School of Design's Museum of Art (224 Benefit St., Providence), February 11-April 24. Its public opening will be Thursday, Feb. 16, from 7-9 p.m.

The Overview show will be at AS220 (115 Empire St., Providence) February 11-24, with its public opening February 10 from 7-10 p.m. Tour guides will give talks about the museum, AS220 and the downtown Providence area.

The public opening of the new AS220 Complex arts center will take place on Sunday, February 13. The reception will be from 1-2 p.m., with opening ceremonies from 2-3 p.m. and an open house from 3-6 p.m.