

4-9-1995

Street-smart action from Green Mountain state

Bill

The Providence Journal

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/as220_root



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bill and The Providence Journal, "Street-smart action from Green Mountain state" (1995). *AS220 Digital Archive*. 1841.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/as220_root/1841

This is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in AS220 Digital Archive by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ric.edu.

Street-smart action from Green Mountain state

By **BILL VAN SICLEN**
Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

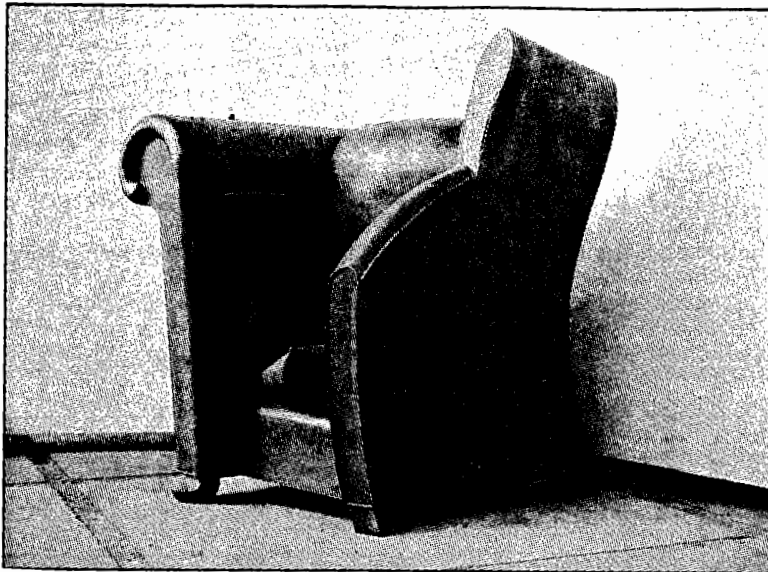
PROVIDENCE — A lot of good things come from Vermont, including maple syrup, aged cheddar and Ben & Jerry's ice cream. But if the North Bennington Independent Artists' Space has its way, the Green Mountain state may soon be famous for another kind of export: contemporary art.

"We already have arrangements with galleries in New York and Boston," says Andrew Cohen, director of the Vermont-based artists' group, which is known by the politically correct acronym NoBIAS. "Ultimately, we hope to have a whole network of galleries and exhibit spaces that we can work with. They'd send exhibits to us and we'd send exhibits to them."

In one of the first such swaps, Cohen and NoBIAS have brought about 30 works by as many artists to the upstairs galleries at AS220, the alternative art and performance center in downtown Providence. The selection ranges from the realistic to the non-linear and from painting and sculpture to video and installation. Indeed, about the only things that unite these artists are geography (they all live in the Northern Berkshires region of Vermont, Massachusetts and New York) and the desire to go beyond the picturesque New England landscape.

"Most of the artists here have a very contemporary sensibility," Cohen says. "They don't do pictures of cows or barns. They may live in Vermont, but they're very aware of what's going on outside the state."

A good example is Emily Eveleth, a painter who specializes in close-



CRAFTSMAN'S SPIRIT: Shaun Cassidy's huge welded-steel chair.

ups of jelly donuts. There are echoes of more traditional art in these mammoth mounds of flour and sugar, especially the lush colors and heroic scale of 19th-century landscape painting. But the kitschy subject matter and the slyly subversive intelligence behind it are unmistakably contemporary.

Eveleth's fascination with junk food, for example, recalls the work of Claes Oldenberg, the Pop Art sculptor who launched his career with an exhibition of overstuffed hamburgers, hotdogs and ice cream cones. Her choice of jelly donuts, meanwhile, suggests both a street-wise assertion of female sexuality (compare the lyrics of blues singer Bessie Smith) and a reference to

feminist-inspired social issues such as binge-eating and bulimia.

Then again, they might just be paintings of doughnuts.

Another artist who'd be right at home in a New York gallery is Stephen J. Shanabrook, who is represented by two works: a wrinkled relief print called *Still Life of Blood Shirt with Broken Tooth* and a creepy little wall construction called *Softspine*.

True to its title, the print appears to have been made by running a bloody shirt and part of a chipped tooth through a printing press. The experience probably didn't do much for Shanabrook's shirt, but it did leave a ghostly impression of folds, seams and buttons (as well as a small tooth mark) on the print itself. From a distance, these markings are barely visible. But from closer up, they take on an unexpected poignancy — like the petrified remains of some ancient animal.

Softspine consists of several dozen bandaids that have been applied to the wall in an undulating S-curve. In the center of each bandaid, Shanabrook has placed a spoonful of bright red jelly. The result, which recalls the work of New York sculptor Kiki Smith, is an edgy blend of old and new — part fossilized skeleton, part fresh bone and sinew.

Despite their taste for cutting edge styles and techniques, however, most of the NoBIAS artists pay

their respects to at least one tradition — that of the New England craftsman. They may not do landscapes, but they do care about the materials they use and how they use them.

Paul Katz, for example, uses layers of sand and gravel to build up a heavy, crust-like surface for his painting *Winter Journey*. A small model of a New England church by Bill Botzow is covered by a snow-like dusting of paint chips. And a globe-shaped sculpture by Dean Snyder is wrapped with thin strips of rawhide. It looks like a giant baseball that has seen too many home runs.

The craftsman's spirit also lives on in the work of Shaun Cassidy, a sculptor whose huge welded-steel chair has spent the last week in front of the AS220 complex at 115 Empire Street. At once awkward and elegant, welcoming and forbidding, it's one of the show's best pieces. There are hints of Surrealism in the chair's quirky angles and Schwartzegger-ish size. But there are also ties to the time-honored Yankee tradition of do-it-yourself metalwork. As more than one Vermont farmer has discovered, patching a tractor and making large-scale metal sculptures aren't all that dissimilar.

The show, which is called *Northern Voices: The No-Brow Traveling Medicine Show at AS220*, does have some problems. The installation, which spills out of AS220's second floor gallery and into the adjacent hallway and stairwells, is crowded to the point of being cramped. And the video selections should have been confiscated at the Massachusetts-Vermont border. But these are small complaints, especially given the sly intelligence of Eveleth's paintings, the creepy imagination behind Shanabrook's sculptures and the cranky do-it-yourself spirit of Cassidy's welded metal chair.

Let's hope AS220 does as well when it sends a selection of made-in-Rhode-Island art to North Bennington in the fall.

Northern Voices: The No-Brow Traveling Medicine Show at AS220 continues through April 30 at AS220, 115 Empire St. in Providence. Hours are Monday through Friday 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 1-4 p.m.

See how sculptors draw; 'Take a Seat' at RISD

Local galleries are busy this weekend.

In Providence, the Wheeler Gallery is hosting an exhibit of drawings by contemporary sculptors. What makes the show especially interesting is that the 20 or so works on display are all finished drawings — not the rough sketches and working drawings that often accompany sculpture exhibitions, but independent works of art. All of them tell us something about the sculptural interests of the artists who made them. But they're also meant to be seen and enjoyed for their own sake.

Nade Haley, a RISD instructor

ART WRAPUP

By Bill Van Siclen

season with an exhibit of paintings and ceramics by three RISD faculty members: Holly Hughes, Nancy Friese and Christina Bertoni.

Friese specializes in big rainbow-colored landscapes that have some of the restless energy of Van Gogh's late paintings. At the same time, there's a dreamy, almost ethereal side to Friese's artistic personality. The result is a rare combination — part fidgety

SEQUESTER THIS!