

Art Notes

By Grace Glueck

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WITH-IT art worldlings have known for a while that the toughest, hairiest, of the searchingest, outpost of the avant-garde is the Jean Freeman Gallery at 26 West 57th St., opened last fall. Its roster of five far-out conceptual shows to date has included a "Lightning Piece" by Justine Dane, Daniel Warren's "Plastic Deterioration," and the current "Water Planet" by Michael O'Day.

No one could actually claim to have seen any of the shows, to be sure, since the W. 57th St. address proves impossible to find. And no one really ever met the gallery's groovy artists. But Freeman has taken big ads in major art publications, sent out enticing press releases, achieved listing in some of the media. And its obliging proprietor, Niesus Stacion, has usually been available via telephone.

The plain truth, however, is that there is no Jean Freeman Gallery. A conceptual work of art itself, it exists only in the media, conversations about it, and the teeming brain of Terry Fugate-Wilcox, a deadpan young artist-émigré from the sterile reaches of Kalamazoo, Mich. "I've been working up to it for the three years I've lived in New York," confessed F-W recently, under relentless grilling from this investigator. "Then last spring I attended a big art blast in a downtown loft, complete with bartenders, a live band, long skirts and limousines waiting in the alley. I knew I had to do it, things had become so ridiculous."

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With his wife, Valerie, F-W sallied uptown from their own downtown loft to find a suitable non-address; discovered that number 26 had been left out of W. 57th, right across from the Dwan Gallery, where his own work has appeared in group shows. The F-W's bought a filing cabinet, opened a checking account in the gallery's name, and asked the post office to forward Freeman mail to their downtown home. Then they placed ads and sent out publicity mailings.

The name? "Jean sounded both male and female, and Freeman is the name of a friend," says F-W. "It has a nice ring." The two made up monikers for the gallery's artists, but the "works" are actually process pieces hatched in the past by F-W himself. Taking on "a life of its own," the gallery was soon bombarded with portfolios submitted by show-seeking artists (all have

been turned down), job applications, sales pitches from admen, requests for photographs and catalogues of exhibiting artists' work. But its biggest triumph came last fall, when it threw a giant loft party for mythical artist Justine Dane. "Arriving guests would ask where she was," recalls Mrs. F-W, "and I'd point vaguely into the distance. 'Oh, of course,' they'd say. 'I saw her last show in California' Or, 'I'm a friend of her cousin.' "

The Jean Freeman Gallery as such will die in March, since the F-W's can no longer afford to support it. But though Fugate-Wilcox will sign it as a completed work of art, he'd like to perpetuate it, "maybe in the form of a newsletter about conceptual art." The 4-drawer file cabinet, crammed with letters, tapes, artists' portfolios and other pertinent documents, is for sale. Meanwhile, Fugate-Wilcox is not displeased with his work as a piece of art sociology. "It exposes the political structure of the gallery world," he contends. "You can't help but get a good look inside your self when you realize you've gone along with it."

LIB LOBBY

Rumor to the contrary, there's been no female take over at Art News, monthly house organ of the New York art mart. The current special issue just looks that way, devoted as it is to "Women's Liberation, Women Artists and Art History," and adorned with a smashing cover painting of a woman by a woman, long attributed to a man (Marie-Constance Charpentier's portrait of Charlotte du Val d'Ognes, done ca. 1800 and traditionally given by — male — scholars to the painter Jacques-Louis David).

The rousing contents include a brilliant socio-historical analysis by Linda Nochlin Pommer on the quasi question, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" "Sexual Art-Politics," an incisive run-down of the current status of women in art by managing editor Elizabeth C. Baker; a rap on the same subject between painters Elaine de Kooning and Rosalyn Drexler, plus pensees from artists Louise Nevelson, Suzi Gablik, Lynda Benglis, Marjorie Strider, Eleanor Antin, Rosemarie Castoro.

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The lone male voice is that of editor Thomas B. Hess, who lends brotherly support in an editorial entitled "Is Women's Lib Medieval?" (the title is not pejorative; Hess theorizes that women achieved more in the visual arts during the anonymous Middle Ages than they have "under the rule of the individual that was promulgated during the Renaissance").

The chef d'oeuvre is the Pommer piece, prepared for a forthcoming anthology, "Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness," to be published by Basic Books. Dr. Pommer, professor of art history at Vassar, sets out to prove, and does, that the question itself is "simply the top tenth of an iceberg of misinterpretation and misconception." Female art powerlessness, she holds, stems from "the automatically, institutionally

maintained discrimination against women” that has prevailed in society. One example: From the Renaissance to nearly the end of the 19th century, women were excluded from “life classes” at art academies where nude models, male or female, posed.

Hess believes that the special issue copiously illustrated with seldom-seen works by women, is a first among cultural magazines. Art News, incidentally, can claim to be less male chauvinist than many publications: its managerial staff of six boasts two women (Miss Baker and associate editor Dolores Fenn) and, following the U.S. population pattern, half its staff of 16 art reviewers is distaff.

BEE SWAX BEVY

On the other hand, there has been a female takeover at the Sonnabend Gallery, where a bevy of lovingly-de tailed nude wax minikins, none more than 6” high, dis port in room-like Plexiglass boxes. The transparent cases, which would give any Peep ing Tom a high, are the crea tion of 32-year-old Robert Graham, a Mexican-born San Francisco artist who places his interest in space and light above—well, erotic concerns (his last show, at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles, was closed to viewers under 18).

“I don't deny that they're sexy,” says Graham, whose dark, bushy-maned good looks evoke a certain Jonathan Swift character. “But they work on a lot of levels—I suppose because they're recognizable images, they have more levels than most.” He resents implications of a Gulliver complex, though. “Actually, I don't find the size of the figures strange. It's media size, the same scale you see on TV or in magazines.”

To produce his fragile figures, Graham begins with a real-life model, photographing her movements with a motor ized camera. From the photos he makes a master figure of beeswax, and from it, a mold. The latter is used to produce a series of identical figures, as many as Graham likes. “They all come static out of the mold, but the muscles and everything are correct, so can shape the figure to any bodily gesture. Girls are easier to make than men, mostly for technical reasons about male musculature.”

Placed in an airy but austere, box, each figure defines the space in a series of postures — running, standing, sitting, bending, lying—like a clip from a movie film. A viewer, perceiving the toy space, gets its relationships all at once, as he can't in a life-size tableau. “You can do anything in that scale,” says Graham. “If you can believe in it, it behaves like real space.”

Graham, his wife Joey and their son Stephen, 8, live part of the time in Los Angeles, part in London; can't decide which they like better. “We've found that you see the same people everywhere, anyway,” muses Graham. “The same merchandise, too.”