Smith, Roberta. "3 Museums Collaborate To Sum Up a Decade," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1990.

The New York Times

What happened to American art during the tumultuous, combative 1980's is a large and multi-faceted subject that will undoubtedly be debated for some time. But less than six months into the 90's, one of the first assessments has already arrived, in the form of the messy, provocative exhibition titled "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980's."

This exhibition comes from an unusual collaboration of three young and very different museums well known for presenting alternative views of contemporary art: the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Hispanic Contemporary Art, both in SoHo, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Not surprisingly, the curators at these museums have knit their alternative agendas into an alternative overview. "The Decade Show" and its thick opinionated catalogue try to shake up any ideas about 80's art that aren't nailed down, and may say as much about art's future as they do about its recent past.

The exhibition gathers together work by more than 100 creators of paintings, sculptures and installation pieces and nearly 40 video and performance artists. It features many collaborative efforts, in paintings to political posters, from Tim Rollins and K.O.S., the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, Group Material and a relatively unknown Asian-American artists' collective called Epoxy Art Group.

In all ways, this multi-media extravaganza works back and forth between different art forms and different segments of society - the Hispanic, American Indian, Asian-American, African-American and European populations - positing a much broader, culturally diverse mainstream, not unlike those that already exist in American music, literature and, to some extent, theater.

At the New Museum, for example, Louise Lawler's rather didactic tongue-in-cheek comparison of art and atomic-weapon stockpiles is just a few feet away from Luis Jimenez's mannered and satirical "Southwest Pieta," a huge Fiberglas sculpture whose gaudy streamlinings suggest the animated parts of "Who Framed Roger Rabbit."

At the Hispanic museum, Cindy Sherman's self-portraits hang near photographs in Richard Ray Whitman's "Street Chiefs Series," understated studies of homeless American Indian men. And at the Studio Museum, Hans Haacke's "Photo Documentation of U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada" faces Faith Ringgold's enormous and richly detailed "Street Story," a work that combines painting, quilting and narrative.

"The Decade Show" has many strengths and weaknesses. In some ways, it represents an unprecedented mix. In others, it simply takes the fragmentation and obsession with consciousness that was endemic to American art in the 80's and pushes them to new, but not always unfamiliar, extremes.

Instead of a stylistic survey, the show's organizers have opted for an issue-oriented exploration, and in this age of feminism, homelessness, AIDS and increasing racial and ethnic diversity - and tension - the umbrella issue they have designated is identity.

Their selections are organized around six themes that may ultimately blur together, but that nonetheless give each venue a different focus and atmosphere. These themes are called biography-autobiography and

sexuality-gender (at the Hispanic museum); myth-spirituality-nature and discourse-media (at the New Museum), and social practices-cultural criticism and history-memory-artifact (at the Studio Museum).

The show is important as an effort to democratize and widen post-modernist art theory, which has often argued that art should be critical of various forms of power and oppression while supporting a rather short list of white artists, most of whom are men. This show's message is: when dealing with issues of oppression and difference, let's hear from the oppressed and different, from artists whose sensibilities have been shaped by being Asians or women or homosexuals.

Yes, there are a number of more or less certified 1980's art stars here, including Jenny Holzer, Eric Fischl, Komar and Melamid, Barbara Kruger, Martin Puryear and Bruce Nauman. Still in many instances, these artists, whether through the crowded installations or simple overexposure, seem almost to occupy the margins of this show. It belongs to other voices, to artists as diverse in ethnic origin, age and reputation as Betye Saar, Martha Rosler, Cecilia Vicuna, Miriam Beerman, Louis Bernal, John Coplans, Yon Soon Min, Pok-Chi Lau, Nick Quijano, Alison Saar and David Wojnarowicz.

At certain points, the exhibition seems to be on the verge of simply establishing an alternative orthodoxy: to whit, to be viable contemporary art, it must be overtly socially engaged. But a closer look reveals a rather carefully cultivated open-endedness. The viewer is invited to consider a short well-worded diatribe from Edgar Heap-of-Birds titled "Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi" at the Studio Museum, and also to see a painting by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith that fuses abstraction, language and ideograms in a way that makes Indian culture only one of several subjects.

A similar balance is visible in the the four small wall sculptures from Melvin Edwards's "Lynch Fragments" series, clenched condensations of welded steel scrap and chain in which fury and formal grace, Cubism and African fetish have equal parts. Downtown at the New Museum, lynching as a fact of American history in general and black consciousness in particular is dealt with in completely different ways, one hot, one cool by Pat Ward Williams and Lorna Simpson, while Maren Hassinger's "Field," in which strands of steel spring like grass (or hair) from cement slabs, has a deliberately inflected Formalism similar to Mr. Edwards's.

At other points, this open-endedness is not actually so open. The selection of the white artists could actually have been more venturesome, more off the beaten path. It is unfortunate that while Ms. Sherman, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons and Mary Kelly, artists amply anointed by the earlier, narrower post-modernism, are represented here, Elizabeth Murray, a painter whose work deals just as adamantly with consciousness and identity, is not. Neither are much less well-known artists like Collier Schorr, whose art explores the issue of lesbianism with unusual effectiveness.

As a picture of what's wrong with American society, especially with its treatment of minorities and their cultures, this exhibition is often harrowing and should be required viewing for politicians and art lovers. As a picture of what the established art world frequently avoids seeing, it is also thoroughly illuminating.

But it must also be said that much too often the art in this exhibition nourishes the heart and mind more than the eye. Sincerity, alienation and just causes don't necessarily make convincing artworks. Regardless of questions about individual artworks in this rangy exhibition, "The Decade Show" confirms that visual quality is a many-splendored thing that emanates from all sectors of America's multi-cultural society.

"The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identities in the 1980's" remains through Aug. 19 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway, near Prince Street, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 584 Broadway, near Prince Street, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street.

Photo: "Field" by Maren Hassinger, foreground, with works by Ana Mendieta, from left, George Longfish, and Kaylynn Sullivan Two Trees in "The Decade Show" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. (The New Museum of Contemporary Art)