

Silver is golden as Leach keeps Portland on artistic edge

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

A series of playful, Joan Miro-esque gestures by Gustavo Rivera. Fragments of cardboard boxes glued together in the shape of a bird by Robert Rauschenberg. A lyric, symphonic expression of color and form by the great Lee Krasner.

The 25th anniversary show at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery offers a short history of collage, the revolutionary but clunky-looking art form that re-oriented what an artwork could be. At first glance, it seems the wrong media for Leach to celebrate a major anniversary. A California native who graduated from Scripps College, Leach was deeply influenced by the work of Robert Irwin and has often been attracted to conceptual artists whose work either directly or indirectly recalls the light and space movement of the 1960s.

review

25th Anniversary
show

Where: Elizabeth Leach
Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth
Ave.

When: 10:30 a.m.-5:30
p.m. Tuesday-Saturday

Closes: Dec. 30

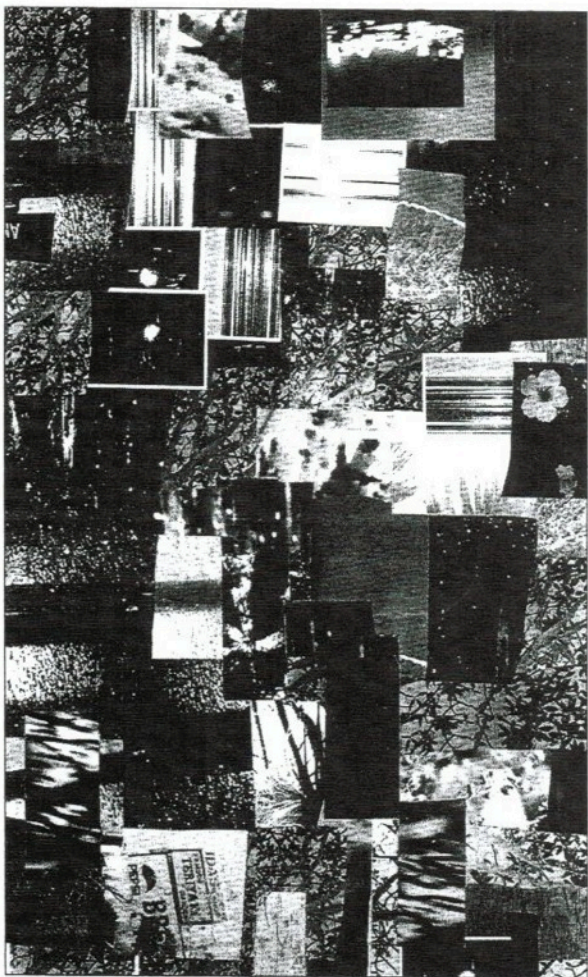
Step back from the subtle light rays of history. Collage ends up as an appropriate and rightful theme for Leach's anniversary exhibit: The dealer has made bringing the rest of the art world to Portland — and vice versa — her abiding mission, thus helping orient, if not revolutionize, local attitudes about the art business.

Like any business, that mission has had many high points and misadventures. But walking through this current show, such provocative back story seems suited for another time.

These more than two dozen collages spanning a century push the viewer to look upward and applaud.

For the many local artists appearing in the show, the celebration is surely a dream realized in one regard: It's not often that the likes of M.K. Guth, Amanda Wojick, Michelle Ross and John Brodie get to show alongside so many of art history's greats. But blurring distinctions between artistic hierarchy, time, region, form and place has been one of Leach's enduring philosophies, even with her terrible shows. Leach follows the art world's most commanding theme: Art is about context, relationships.

Those relationships involve many overlapping artistic narratives in this show. But gauging how well emerging local talents compare to more notable figures is a big pique. As with any large group exhibit, there are a few downers: Malia Jensen's



Untitled collage by Jack Pierson

image of pigeons is too clever by half and too shallow by a whole. And Ross' mining of the history of abstraction ends up a touchingly fragile mess that seems too aware of its delicacy.

But mostly, they fare well, partly because some of the work by notable artists is secondary. The Rauschenberg piece is a minor one, for instance. And the two Joseph Cornell works are also below the major fold, though they still capture the artist's peculiarly cloistered worldview.

Personally, I prefer Brodie's weird, beautiful mishmash of abstract colors, interior landscape scene and human figures cul-

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minating with a freaky mannequin's face; Al Souza's brilliant confection of Life Savers, frozen Popsicles and other candy made out of puzzle pieces; and sculptor Ken Butler's stripped-together picture of a violin has a prismatic, stutty feel reminiscent of an antique home movie.

Again, viewers can spend hours locating numerous thematic and technical relationships between these works. But one that needs to be mentioned — especially given the occasion of the show — is Leach's relationship to younger artists.

Leach has always aggressively complemented her veteran artists

with younger, emerging ones. Sometimes, that has seemed a strained effort, an attempt to stay youthful in those moments when Leach shepherds artists whose work is as thin as the walls of a skid row condo. (Look, for example, at the collages of a rising group of nascently talented artists in this show — Beth Campbell, Sarah Cain and Karen Weiner.)

Ultimately, it would be unfair to say Leach has been the only ambitious dealer in town who has pursued an artistic vision that reaches beyond the region. Tracy Savage and the Butters Gallery, for example, have consistently presented the work of artists from outside the Northwest.

But Leach has usually taken risks

before others. Look, for instance, at the number of galleries that now inhabit the Pearl District in recently purchased spaces, including PDX Contemporary Art, Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery and the development of galleries soon to open in the former Daisy Kingdom Building on the North Park Blocks.

Leach, with a gentle push by Bruce Guenther, the Portland Art Museum's chief curator, helped usher this era of gallery redevelopment in the Pearl District (though after Savage settled and closed shop nearby). That leading role as business risk taker, along with the work in this silver anniversary show, cements Leach's rare art world perch as dealer, instigator, provocateur and arbiter of taste and importance.