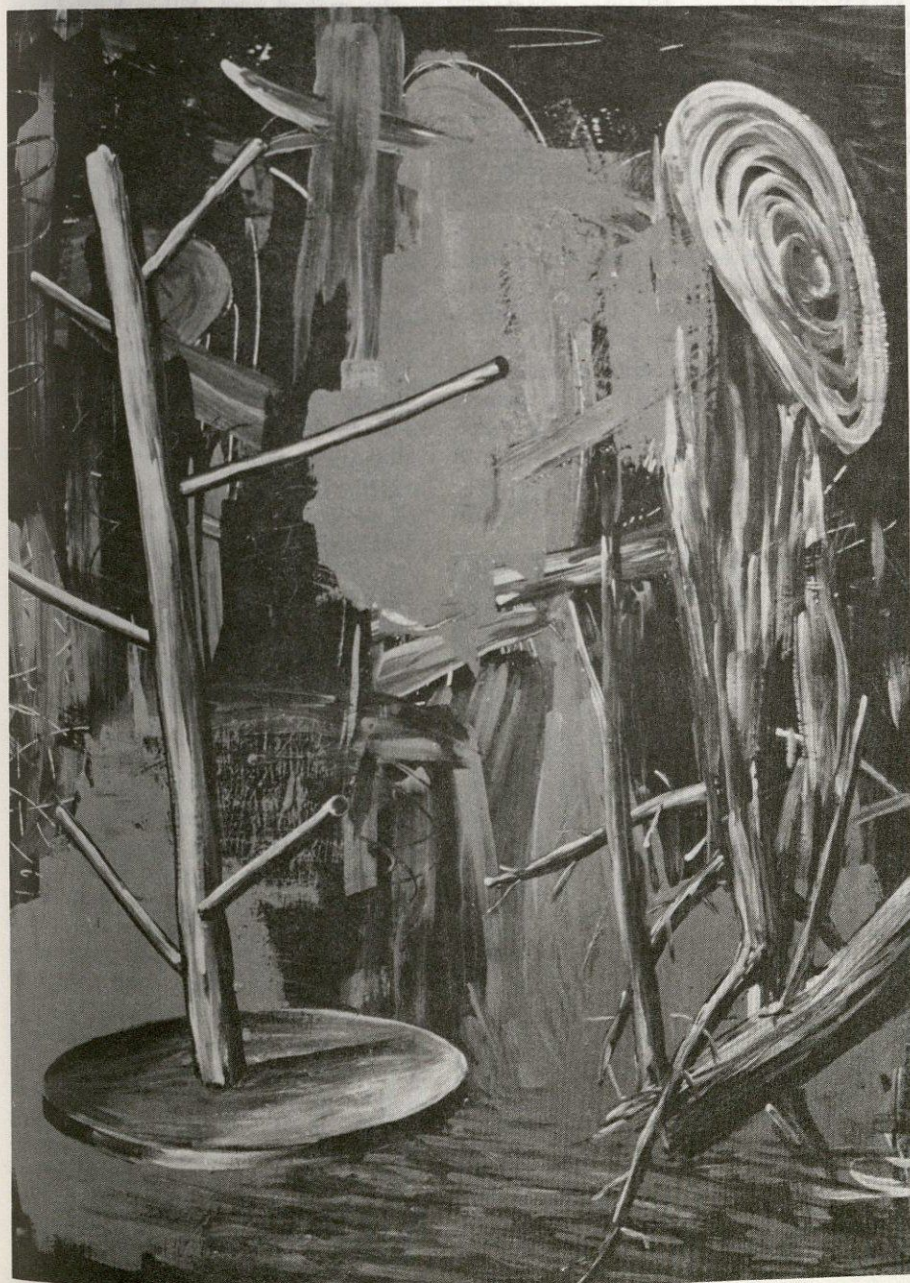


# An 'Emerging' cliché

## New Talent exhibitions prevail in Chicago

DAN DEVENING, "Swamp Story," acrylic on paper, 19" x 25", 1985. Photo courtesy of Randolph Street Gallery.



by JAMES YOOD

The phenomena that make up our art world sometimes enter on cats paws, so quickly becoming part of our consciousness that we are often unaware of them, so quietly a part of our lexicon that we think it must have always been so. The most obvious example in the 1980s is certainly the ascendancy of European art, and few remember that a decade ago not too many of us could name five living European artists under the age of 60.

And there have been more instances of this kind of near-instant assimilation. The change in performance art's status from '60s oddity to '80s mainstream, image appropriation, the institutionalization of alternative spaces, regular retrospectives of mid-career artists, the rise of the exhibition catalogue essay as a variant of art criticism, all these are new phenomena that have become standard features of our aesthetic terrain. They tell us much of what we are.

Among the articles of faith that have recently come to dominate the art scene in Chicago is a kind of exhibition which goes under the generic heading of The Emerging Show, exhibitions composed of artists who are underseen and who lack commercial gallery affiliation. In the month of September alone, four such exhibitions were held at major alternative and institutional gallery spaces in Chicago, each with a slightly different curatorial premise, yet each dedicated to the proposition that it is a

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function of art professionals to be prescient, to bring to the public tomorrow's talent today. What do these exhibitions, in their makeup and their articulation, tell us about what it means to be an artist in Chicago at this moment?

"Emerging" at the State of Illinois Art Gallery, "Unscene" at ARC Gallery, "Confluence without Influence" at Randolph Street Gallery, and "Unknown Chicago Painters" at Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois at Chicago presented the work of some 70 artists, all, in the words of one press release "as yet relatively unknown to the



galleries, collectors, and the general public." Besides these four exhibitions, Chicago is deluged with many more of their ilk; annually many of the alternative galleries devote a month to a large show, last year called "6 X 6", which had almost 70 participants.

In all of these emerging shows, including those hosted by the alternatives, an interesting legitimization of the process has been in having it curated (or juried, if you prefer) by art professionals outside of the alternative system. This frees the exhibition from the vagaries of internal politics and gives it a kind of accreditation it might otherwise lack.

The four exhibitions mentioned above engaged in variations of that curatorial scheme. "Unscene" at ARC Gallery had two curators: Deven Golden, an artist who is a curator at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, and Sue Taylor, an art historian who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, writes art criticism for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. "Unknown Chicago Painters" was curated by Randy Alexander, then director of performance at Randolph Street Gallery, and now a director of Betsy Rosenfield Gallery. "Emerging" at the State of Illinois Art Gallery was held under the auspices of the Renaissance Society, one of Chicago's oldest and most respected alternative spaces. Twenty-five local art professionals (including this writer) each selected one emerging artist to participate. "Confluence without Influence"

was curated by Stephen Reynolds, himself an emerging artist exhibited in two of the other three shows under discussion.

Chicago is beginning to represent the Byzantine Imperial Court in terms of its interconnected art world. Someone once called Chicago the biggest small town in America, and it is impossible to exist in the art world here without overlapping loyalties, and without developing a series of favors rendered and favors requested. Call it the Daley legacy. Whatever else one thinks of these four exhibitions, none was free of varying degrees of conflicts of interest. Each show raised some eyebrows locally; this may be inevitable, but it was nonetheless disconcerting. This too tells us much about what we are.

The four shows were fascinating. At ARC, Golden and Taylor selected 28 artists, each represented by three or four works. Certainly worthy of mention were Peter Lekousis's 3-D photographs, Vaughn Kurtz's raw and gestural paintings, Ann Worthing's creamy landscape paintings, Dan Mills's vertical constructions, Stephen Reynolds's excellent painted relief constructions, Jim Chlopecki's wall mounted sculpture, Matthew Williams's tiny tour de force paintings, and Judith Kitzes's witty constructions.

At Randolph Street Gallery, Stephen Reynolds selected "eight unseen, underseen, and emerging Chicago artists" to be part of "Confluence without Influence." Again, each artist was represented by several works, with Dan

Devening's outstanding paintings and Deven Golden's excellent sequence of painted torso shapes particularly striking.

Randy Alexander chose five painters to be part of "Unknown Chicago Painters—An Eclectic Selection of Emerging Work," and several examples of each were exhibited. Elizabeth Riggle's huge paintings had a strength and presence that signal a real talent, and Susan Wexler's layered paintings were engrossing.

In Helmut Jahn's new State of Illinois Building, the 25 curators and their attendant 25 artists are a bit harder to judge, as each artist was represented by only one work. The selection made by each curator was kept confidential, and much of the discussion about the show was composed of trying to guess who picked who. Although it can be an error to judge emergent talent by examining only one example of their craft, mention should be made of Jin Soo Kim's mysterious drawing, David Kotker's graceful bronze sculpture, and John Dunn's beautiful painting.

It should almost go without saying that none of these exhibitions was accompanied by anything resembling a catalogue or a curatorial essay. Emerging shows are "Here-it-is" shows; the curators do an enormous amount of looking and thinking in preparation for them, and the art they put on the walls falls under the rubric of being the best of that to which they were exposed. In the various one-page press releases which describe their exhibitions, only Stephen Reynolds wrote of an underlying premise, that of selecting "artists working in a variety of styles and mediums who share sensibilities in the use of materials, in the making of shapes, and the application of shape as metaphor."

The absence of an intellectual premise in these exhibitions was in a sense reinforced by the extraordinary eclecticism of the art presented. It would be, quite simply, impossible to gauge trends in Chicago art by the work of these emergent artists, besides noting that young artists are the same everywhere: anything goes. Perhaps part of the cosmopolitanization of Chicago will be the loss of what some see as its idiosyncratic and fussy style. These artists proved as capable of reading *Ariforum* as their confreres in New York, and one sensed as much of Anselm Kiefer as Joseph Yoakum here. All in all, though, it is the quality of art that is important, not its pedigree, and by any estimate of local interest these exhibitions succeeded admirably. The largest single criticism heard was that



ELIZABETH RIGGLE, "Untitled," oil on paper, 8' x 12'6", 1985. Photo courtesy of Gallery 400 at The University of Illinois at Chicago.



many of the artists were not really emerging—several now have, or have had gallery affiliation, and a few have been featured in major museum exhibitions.

Already a few of the artists have been contacted by commercial galleries, the process of triage has begun. This raises an odd kind of Catch-22, for when an artist passes from the emerging stage to that of having a dealer, a curious thing happens in Chicago—they disappear.

What is commercial representation anyway, and what has it come to mean? A decade or two ago it was the certification of a certain kind of mastery, and that step necessary to realize the kind of income that would lead to financial independence. But not any more. Now, having a dealer means that you will probably be half of a two-person show every second year, and that sales are possible, but really just a bonus, and one goes on waiting on tables and doing carpentry work. Commercial representation further means that you are ineligible for these emerging and unseen shows.

What is truly happening is that there are two kinds of successful artists in Chicago. There is the emerging artist who eschews commercial representation, and gets shown, and the old master who doesn't really need to be shown. Lost in the middle are, ironically, those men and women who most believe create the finest body of work produced in Chicago—artists, say, in their thirties who have dealers, but no exposure, who have passed through the Emerging stage, and languish in a kind of no-man's land, seen in no larger context. We have these shows from which they emerge, and then no follow-up on what they emerge towards. It is they who are the true unseen.

Considering this lacuna in a most significant area of Chicago art, it is difficult to justify this plethora of emerging shows, why they should come so frequently, and why they should supplant other exhibitions that would serve more valuable purposes. If institutions and cultural organizations are seeking an area in which to make a contribution to the cultural life of Chicago, perhaps they could initiate those exhibitions that our larger museums seem reticent to attempt—namely, shows which assess where Chicago has been, where it is, and where it is going. ■

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## ALTERNATIVE SPACES/EMERGING ARTISTS

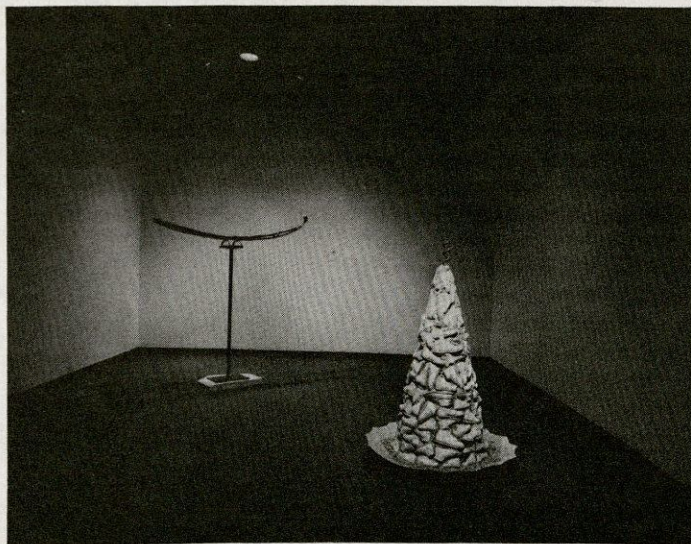
A voracious appetite for new talent does more than pad resumes; in a sense these exhibitions document a change in the attitude and function of alternative galleries. The history of the alternative space in Chicago is a complicated one, but certainly those founded in the 1970s had at their core the desire to serve concerns that commercial galleries would not or could not: performance art, political art, installation, feminist issues, et al.—all the often non-marketable legacies of that period. It is the history of the 1980s that a true case of image-appropriation has occurred; the passions of the '70s have either disappeared or have been consumed whole by the commercial galleries, disenfranchising alternative spaces of a major part of their credo.

This is happening today, and it is unclear what the future will bring. In the past 18 months, three major alternative galleries—N.A.M.E., Artemisia, and ARC—have moved into gallery spaces in the heart of the commercial Superior/Huron district, into the belly of the beast, as it were. They have been joined by new institutional spaces representing several local universities. This bold maneuver has had mixed results; the alternatives profit from expanded exposure, but have had their focus blurred by the commercial galleries that abut them. A current cliché is that the alternative galleries have become alternative to nothing, but the truth is more pernicious and frightening than that. Their recent record shows that they have become weak and diluted alternatives, unclear in their mission, halting in their steps. This is not a case of individual failure, but rather a mirror of our time, and the alternative galleries anxiously await the potential rejuvenation that the future may bring.

Due to their institutional support, due to the fundraiser energies of their boards of directors, due to the boon of government grants, alternative spaces are largely free of the painful reality of a capitalist concern—the need to generate financial profit. Strong exhibitions generate no more income than do weak ones, and alternative spaces have always exercised their privilege to adventure and to take risks. It is not their fault that this is not an adventurous time, and that risk-taking is a happy memory of the 1970s.

As they grope towards a new self-definition, alternative spaces have taken up the banner of the emerging exhibition, and have done so with indefatigable regularity. Historically, underseen artists have been the province of the alternatives, supporting their old thesis that here-is-the-art-you-can't-see-anywhere-else. But emerging shows in their structure add a new word to the end of that thesis; they add the word "yet." It's a small word, but one that makes a great deal of difference. These exhibitions are often finally evaluated by how many of their participants are picked up by commercial galleries in the following months. They have become the teething ground for the art-for-profit world, and they raise the spectre of alternative galleries becoming the minor leagues of the art world, grooming young artists for the moment when they will leave alternatives behind, achieving the brass ring of commercial representation.

—J.Y.



Installation photograph of "Emerging 1985," State of Illinois Art Gallery. Left: bronze sculpture by David Kotker; right: sculpture by Jeff Wrona.