

by Chris Potter



Rethinking '96

Ann Hamilton's Bushhead

A few weeks ago, I spent an afternoon at a panel discussion presented by the Carnegie Museum called "Rethinking Regionalism." The title, I'm sorry to say, was a bit of a misnomer: Most of the discussion—led by area artists and critics, all of whom I respect and admire—rehashed what we've always thought about regionalism. That it's a synonym for parochialism, a name we give to art that only matters to a local audience or (worse yet) that panders to nativist sentiments.

The unspoken assumption was that, too often, the term applied to the art made here in Pittsburgh.

Shortly before the forum I'd visited Chicago, where a trip to the New Museum of Contemporary Art turned up two surprises. The first was that the Museum was running two full exhibitions of the work of local artists—an endorsement that would be unthinkable at the Carnegie, whose relations to local artists are much cooler. The second surprise was that the work was not all that much better than the art being made here.

On the day of the Carnegie panel, the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh were holding

their 86th Annual Exhibition—the strongest such show in years. Its success was due in no small part to the award-winning sculptures of Adrienne Heinrich, Kristen Rushmore and Iain Macell, each of whom creates a lyrical, hauntingly delicate sense of absence.

Walking through that show, it occurred to me that the problem of regionalism today lies not in the art, but in the audience. Not in the seriousness of the work itself, but in how seriously it is taken. Over the past year, I've seen the work outgrow the community's ability to appreciate it.

It's good fun to beat up the Carnegie for whatever reason, especially for its apparent discomfort with exhibiting local art. And I find it sort of poignant that the Carnegie's most successful show of the year was *The Odyssey of a Collector*, an exhibit of the works collected by Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., who lived, worked, and began to discover art here in Pittsburgh. Obviously something must be right here.

But things may be improving at The Carnegie: The Museum of Art staff has undergone tremendous change. The Art Institute of Chicago's

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