

ART

Bernstein's two exhibits add up to large ambition

Gerda Meyer Bernstein has exhibited for more than 50 years, and in honor of the landmark she has had four Midwestern exhibitions since last fall. The two in Chicago, her adopted home—she was born in Germany—are at the I Space Gallery and Chicago Cultural Center, presenting one or more examples of her political installations as well as photographic documentation.

The artist characteristically takes on big issues. There are three-dimensional responses to Jewish and African-American race relations, AIDS and protest marches; her color photo-murals also at test to such outsized themes as the Holocaust, Ku Klux Klan, abuse of human rights, and missing people in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador.

I've seen examples of this work since the early 1970s. Always they have been on the right, which is to say, most humane side of the issues they explore, and that is to be appreciated heartily. But the large scale of the installations and the way they often seek to expand into significance by the easy repetition of small components usually has worked against them affecting me as deeply as the subjects demand, and I'm sorry to say that holds true once again.

Powerful themes and intentions are here much more moving than their artistic treatment, and I envy the many viewers who continue to be swept along by the former.

At 230 W. Superior St., through April 7; 312-587-9976; and 78 E. Washington St., through May 6; 312-744-6630.

One of the more fruitful public art programs in town in recent years has been Florasonic, the collaboration between the Experimental Sound Studio and Chicago Park District that commissions audio installa-

tions for the Fern Room of the Lincoln Park Conservatory. It has presented 10 pieces in five years and the current one, by Chicago composer and artist **Shawn Decker**, is among the best because, paradoxically, it's one of the least immediately noticed.

"Chorus" is a four-channel composition based on the sounds of insects. Actual insect sounds come together with electronically synthesized sounds that overlap and extend what's heard in nature. So along with the high-pitched hum of, say, flies and mosquitoes, there might be the chirp of crickets plus a more shining, metallic whistle or stutter resembling the sound of a distant buzz saw.

Each of these lines come in and drop out, thickening and thinning the texture in a continuous rise and fall without climaxes. But the "chorus" performs just at the threshold of the sound of the room's waterfall, so visitors scarcely notice it upon entering and only gradually are aware, if at all, that an artistic construct is in the space with plants and water.

The subtlety with which the piece reveals itself offers a nice parallel to the way in which individual plants non-assertively distinguish themselves from the dense overall fabric.

At 2391 N. Stockton Drive, through April 30. 773-327-7901.

Jason Karolak is a painter in his early 30s whose recent pieces at the Contemporary Art Workshop represent a sizable leap forward from the canvases of just a few years ago when he was working toward a graduate degree in painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

All the pieces, large and small, are abstract though when Karolak paints large he weaves a loose, basket-like structure

REVIEWS

Gerda Meyer Bernstein through April 7 at I Space Gallery and through May 6 at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Shawn Decker through April 30 at the Lincoln Park Conservatory.

Jason Karolak through April 13 at the Contemporary Art Workshop.

Brian Dettmer and James F. Cleary through April 20 at the International Museum of Surgical Science.

that begins, broadly open at the top, in bright light and color—gradually receding into implied deep space with tighter forms and darker colors. Each vessel is made up of undulating swipes from a loaded brush that recall the "wiggly line" found in much Chicago art, and the artist's clear concern for light also seems part of a tradition in local painting.

Karolak's smaller pieces rely more heavily on patches of color, sometimes with soft, rounded edges. These may share space with ribbons of color that unfurl and flutter as if they were pennants caught in the wind outside. But the strongest of the small works presents a virtual wall of color plaques that slightly bends away from viewers, denying flatness by again implying a space that extends into the picture.

At 542 W. Grant Pl., through April 13. 773-472-4004.

Brian Dettmer and James F. Cleary both make art from objects that originally had other uses, but as is shown in their solo exhibitions at the International Museum of Surgical Science, their works are not at all alike in form, tone or impact.

Dettmer creates largely sculptural works from altered "communicative objects" such as maps, cassette tapes and books. His piece de resistance is a life-size skeleton, though all his



Alan Artner
Tribune art critic

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FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 2007

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Chicago Tribune

