

JULY 2, 1999

Comic reliefs

Exhibits link humor and artistry

GALLERIES

By Margaret Hawkins

Art and humor have a lot in common. Both require a leap of faith into absurdity without the safety net of logic. Both are about surprise, and surprise can lead to insight.

Perhaps that's why so many late 20th century artists seem to be making art with a sense of humor.

John Ruppert's installation in the Evanston Art Center's ongoing Sculpture on the Grounds exhibit is a case in point. Ruppert fashions giant vessels out of chain link fencing and installs these in natural settings such as beaches and parks.

The three vessels now on view on the front lawn of the Art Center seem to float on the grass like huge seed pods that blew in off the lake. All are about 20 feet tall and bulbous, and each is shaped differently. One looks like a jar, another like a barrel and a third like a huge, full sack that plumps out toward the bottom.

At first, the idea of using this most unglamorous material in settings of natural beauty seems funny and even irreverent. We associate chain link fences with urban ugliness. The way Ruppert uses this material melts away our idea of what belongs where. These big objects are in fact light and open. They look like enormous mesh bags full of nothing but air yet full to the point of bulging. Inside each is a little patch of long grass and clover, inaccessible to the mowers that keep the grounds looking groomed.

The humor comes in the absurdity of building vessels that are full of holes, that apparently cannot contain. Yet they do contain air and the longer we look at them the more they seem to have mass and meaning.

To walk among these objects is to experience that giddy sense of a thing changing from one form into another. The viewer, perhaps hostile at first to the course industrial material, is won over by the associations Ruppert creates. Metal fencing becomes spider web and sea foam. Empty space is shaped by the suggestion of containment. There is both humor and beauty here.

Tom Aprile's "Spirit Chains," on view inside the Art Center, play with elements of surprise and humor as well. Aprile is a sculptor whose recent work is the culmination of his eight-month study of traditional wood carving in Nigeria while on a Fulbright scholarship there.

In his current work, Aprile disassembles existing objects and reconstructs them into chains. In some cases the objects are man-made—like his wooden bench with the middle section cut out—sawed into links and strung back together. Others are natural objects such as tree limbs he cuts into pieces and then reforms into chains.

There is something mysterious about this work in the way the meaning of the objects falls apart even as they become new objects. If a bench can become a chain what is it? They're like Zen koans. They ask un-



Karen Reimer's "Contingent Solution" at Gallery 312 is one of several cracked plates that the artist has glued back together to form new shapes.

answerable questions and the realization of that paradox produces a burst of humor and new acceptance of a thing which is beyond interpretation.

The underlying humor in all this work, the jaunty, intentionally clumsy way things are broken down and pieced back together, suggests the struggle between the will of the artist and the integrity of the materials. In the end, of course, the materials keep their identity and the wood speaks for itself.

Chicago Artists '99 at Gallery 312 reminds us of what we knew all along, which is that humor is intrinsic to the psyche of this city's art. This oddball group show of so-called emerging artists may be the sleeper of the summer. With no effort to link the artists except to suggest they all have something interesting to say, the work does seem to hang together as idea-originated, rather than purely visual. As a result, naturally, the work is fairly text-heavy as well.

The following are some highlights:

Tom Aprile, John Ruppert

- Evanston Art Center, 2603 Sheridan, Evanston
- Tom Aprile exhibit through July 12; John Ruppert exhibit through March, 2000
- (847) 475-5300

Chicago Artists '99

- Gallery 312, 312 N. May
- Through July 31
- (312) 942-2500

- Karen Reimer's "Forgeries" is a wall-sized curtain of copied postcards taped together and hung from the ceiling. The postcards repeat a handful of standard greetings from euphoric vacationers in idyllic travel destinations. The effort to copy these messages represents Reimer's attempt to appropriate the experience of travelers who send short messages back home. Also by Reimer are cracked plates glued back into new shapes and, my favorites, book pages cop-

ied illegibly in embroidery. All of Reimer's work recycles and reproduces mundane bits of daily life, presenting them in a context that forces us to reconsider their meaning.

- Donald Stahlke's "Bigfoot" collages, which place his own photograph inside steel wool bodies superimposed over natural vistas, are hilarious and oddly likable images.

- Compelling and terrifying and only sometimes funny are Christopher Russell's color photographs of letters, lists, song lyrics and poems. There is no explanation of where these fragments come from, but their damaged appearance, variously clumsy handwritings and tortured messages suggest they were written by prisoners or troubled youths in detention homes. On the other hand, maybe they were all invented by Russell. Whatever they are, I could read a whole roomful

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

WEEKEND

plus

NC