

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia pays homage to Heath Gallery

BY FELICIA FEASTER

PUT A CAST OF 43 ARTISTS

together in one gallery space and you can have either chaos or harmony. *Artists of the Heath Gallery* can at times push the helter-skelter button, as in the gallery's first room, which seems loosely organized around a chromatic minimalism and a cluster of work arranged for a shared emphasis on photography.

But there is some lovely work even amidst the initially jumbled feel — a classic James Van der Zee photo circa 1932 of two Harlem hipsters decked out in matching ankle-grazing fur coats and Jonathan Borofsky's "Chattering Man," a life-size sculpture accompanied by a recording of jaw-flapping patter, which permeates the gallery.

In a survey of work this eclectic, incorporating pieces from the '60s through the '90s, interesting epiphanies emerge, like the ability of some artworks to immediately date itself (such as "Chattering Man," which could only have been made in the '80s) while other work appears perennially modern, like Jim Sitton's delicate 1965 "Skeletal Battle," which flits between abstraction and representation.

VISUAL ARTS

This collection of work by national, international and local artists has been brought together in recognition of the inroads into contemporary art exhibition made by Atlanta's now-defunct but once influential Heath Gallery (1965-1998). The work has been culled by three outside curators — Gudmund Vigtel, John Howett, Laura C. Lieberman — who, in catalog essays



Beverly Buchanan's "Flye Town" (1990)

accompanying the show, recount living in a town that once enthusiastically embraced contemporary art.

The particular arrangements of the work often is as important in *Heath Gallery* as the work chosen by the curators. Things tend to get better as one moves deeper into the exhibition and the particular bent of the exhibition's organizer, Annette Cone-Skelton, co-founder of the Museum of Contemporary Art of

Georgia, asserts itself. Roughly arranged in four rooms — and smaller transitional spaces — it is Cone-Skelton's feel for an aesthetic or thematic connection between works that overrides theoretical schools or chronology.

Such is the case with the two large-scale paintings that face off at the gallery's entrance. On one side, is Edward Ross' 1974 canvas flecked

with shards of blue paint. On the other is an ornamental answer to Ross' overriding minimalism in Howardina Pindell's canvas "Untitled #20." With its fleshy Max Factor tones and smattering of sequins, powder and glitter, it looks like an abstraction of womanly glamour or the detritus culled from Liza Minnelli's dressing room floor.

The best room in the house may be the one featuring work that suggests a conceptualist craft

fair. There is a preponderance of wood, jute, and a humble, low-tech feel to the proceedings in works that also challenge some of art's monumentality.

Julie Fenton's minimalist macramé is an art-making "kit" in the Fluxus tradition, using rolled dice and an enormous ball of twine to create a process-based artwork. Supplying what should be a requisite breath of levity in modern art circles, Dan Talley's "Foot loose and ... the ties that bind" (1978) pairs a ladder balanced on a large leather-bound book with a photo album accessible only by scaling that precarious perch. It's accompanied by an audio recording of someone engaged in a "whoohah-whoohah-whoohah" topple down said ladder. Looking at the work, suddenly you understand the dilemma a lab rat must experience: on one side, the tantalizing morsel of cheese (photo book), on the other hand the electric shock (tipsy ladder). The piece is a wicked commentary on the twinned human urge to know and to retreat from knowledge.

Sharing the room is a quartet of Beverly Buchanan's shotgun shacks from 1990 and ethereal, dainty paintings by both Maud Gatewood (the simple, enchanting "Stars and Fireflies") and the always exquisite gothic miniatures of David Ivie.

The show's other strong suit is another conceptually centered room which has a more butch, heavy-hitting feel than the more feminine, exploratory Talley/Buchanan room. This alcove features Robert Rauschenberg's surprisingly gentle, cosmic "Opal Reunion," the

similarly existential musings of Carl Andre's wooden "compass" sculpture "The Way North and East" and Ronald Jones' photographs of maritime code, which ironically warn of "grave danger" in the most austere and neutral of tones. Jones' incisive work suggests a commentary on contemporary art, which often treats grave issues in a detached, theoretical voice.

The work of local artists proves, in many cases, as impressive and arresting as work by the art stars in *Heath Gallery*. The great service Heath offered Atlantans, the catalogue's essayists assert, was putting the local scene on an equal footing with the national and international one. And what could be more thrilling or more validating than a show like *Heath Gallery* that envisions a Jackson Pollock or Robert Rauschenberg in the same room as work by local artists Ruth Laxton or Jim Frazer?

A kind of unconscious (or conscious) passing of the torch is suggested in *Heath Gallery's* installment at MOCA GA. The show's other implicit agenda, besides celebrating David Heath as an influential figure in Atlanta's art history, is a subtext that sees MOCA GA as the institution left to fill the void left by Heath. Only time will tell. ♦

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Artists of the Heath Gallery, 1965-1998 runs through June 30 at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, 1447 Peachtree St. Tues.-Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun. noon-5 p.m. 404-881-1109.