

Perceptions of one exhibit in two settings

By Edward J. Sozanski
Inquirer Art Critic

"Scale/Ratio" is an unusual exhibition in that it involves related, site-specific installations in two galleries some distance apart. Each installation uses the same components, but in different scale. The components are not intrinsically the subject of the exhibition, however; they're a means of raising questions about the nature of the ideal aesthetic space.

The galleries involved are the Levy Gallery at Moore College of Art and Design and the Jessica Berwind Gallery on Latimer Street. The college gallery is a white modernist cube; the Berwind Gallery, in a small, old townhouse, is also white, but is domestic in scale and ambience.

The artists, Marcia Kocot and Tom Hatten, conceived of "Scale/Ratio" as a way to examine how site, context and scale affect one's perception of painting, and vice versa. Kocot and Hatten have been critical of the fact that paintings usually offer only one optimal viewing position. "Scale/Ratio" addresses that issue by presenting paintings as free-standing objects situated within the room rather than hung on the walls.

The installation at each gallery consists of two paintings and a graphic that is derived from a physics textbook illustration of a magnetic field defined by a pattern of iron filings.

In each case, one painting is exactly half as large as the other. This 1-2 ratio even extends to each element of the paintings — the steel plates that serve as bases, the stretcher bars, even the size of the tacks that anchor the linen canvas to the stretchers.

The conceptual program involves more detail than that, but the basic idea is this: In each gallery, the two vertical paintings stand in the gallery space facing each other. Each painting consists of a black bar next to a white one; the paintings in a pair are mirror images, so that black opposes black.

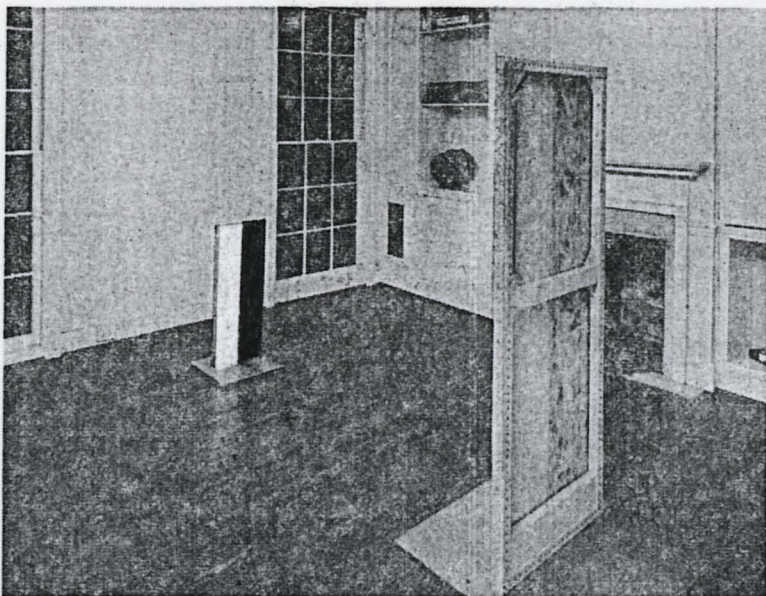
Before reaching the paintings, the viewer encounters the graphic, printed in vivid yellow and black. At Levy, the graphic is mounted on a wall outside the gallery; at Berwind, it takes the form of a floorcloth in the downstairs gallery (the paintings are upstairs).

The Berwind graphic is half the size of the Levy one, just as the larger of the two paintings at Berwind is the same size as the smaller of the two at Levy. Thus the 1-2 ratio links the two spaces. The graphic, showing two magnetic poles generating force fields, establishes the relationship that the viewer is supposed to feel between the two paintings in each gallery.

One can't experience both spaces simultaneously, of course, so it's best to see them at least on the same day, so the installations' impacts on their respective spaces may be immediately compared. The principal difference is this: Even though the scale of paintings to space is virtually identical in both cases, the paintings at Levy feel more monumental than those at Berwind.

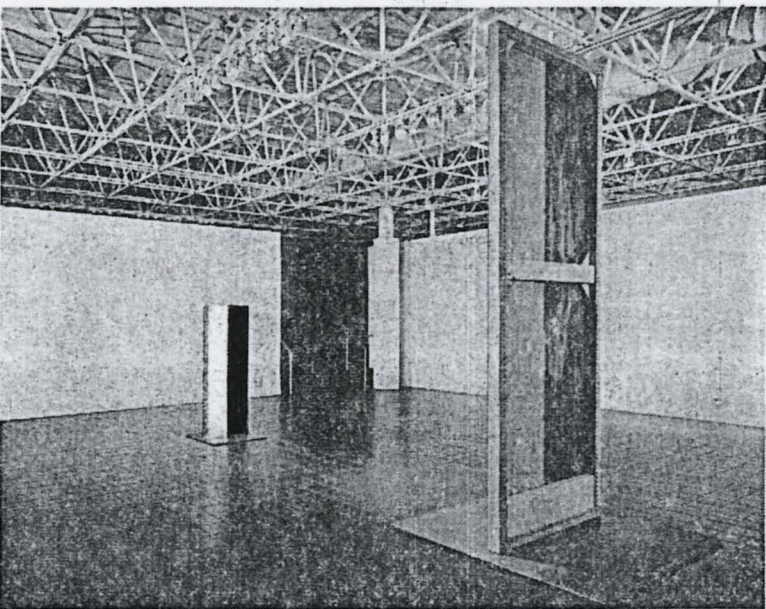
The Levy space is clean, symmetrical and uniformly lighted, and the paintings are totally compatible with it in terms of form, image and facture. At Berwind, the paintings, and especially the graphic, more readily insinuate themselves into the ambience of the space, which is enlivened by architectural elements such as fireplaces and accessories such as furniture, books and objets d'art.

The Berwind space is also animated by one



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"Scale/Ratio" by Marcia Kocot and Tom Hatten at the Jessica Berwind Gallery.



"Scale/Ratio" as it appears at Levy Gallery of Moore College of Art and Design.

element that Kocot and Hatten might not have anticipated — a resident black cat who has taken to posing on and against the pictorial elements. The cat's presence disrupts the precisely controlled environment and distracts one from the business at hand, but it's a welcome distraction.

As for the paintings, standing in the center of a gallery they are more objective than they would be if flat against a wall. They are clearly paintings, not sculptures, but by allowing us to examine them in the round and by encouraging us to examine their meticulous construction, Kocot and Hatten devalue the importance of the images.

These paintings are not so important for what they say — one hardly notices that they say anything — as for their effect as catalysts in focusing one's attention on the space they occupy. They're no longer independent images, as a

painting on a wall would be, but components of a theoretical conceptual exercise.

There is considerably more that could be said about "Scale/Ratio," but this is a piece to be experienced, not to be talked about — since there isn't any "correct" response to it. Admittedly it's a simple program, but the rigor with which Kocot and Hatten have executed it gives the work considerable authority, and the consequences of each installation are complex and unpredictable.

Levy Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, 20th Street and the Parkway. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, noon to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Through Feb. 4. Telephone: 568-4515.
Jessica Berwind Gallery, 1618 Latimer St. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Through Feb. 4. Telephone: 735-3795.