

At last, the Art Museum finds a niche for local art

By Victoria Donohoe
Inquirer Art Critic

For the first time in its history, the Philadelphia Museum of Art is launching a permanent series of exhibits of recent works by artists from — of all places — Philadelphia.

The series of exhibits, entitled "Pertaining to Philadelphia," is being displayed in the central gallery of the modern collections on the museum's first floor as part of a salute to our city's Century IV celebration. The museum is beginning the permanent display with a two-part exhibit of recent works by Philadelphia artists.

What is unique about this is that the museum has never before singled out acquisitions of recent local work in a featured exhibit, let alone devoted a whole series of exhibits to them.

The first part of the exhibition — which will be on view through August — features paintings and sculptures by 15 local artists that have been selected from a small but growing stockpile of 50 contemporary Philadelphia paintings and sculptures and 100 prints, drawings and photos acquired through gift or purchase by the Art Museum since the mid-'60s.

The show that will go on display in September will feature contemporary Philadelphia drawings and etchings acquired since 1965. Thereafter the series will become a permanent fixture, with new shows of a similar format every five months.

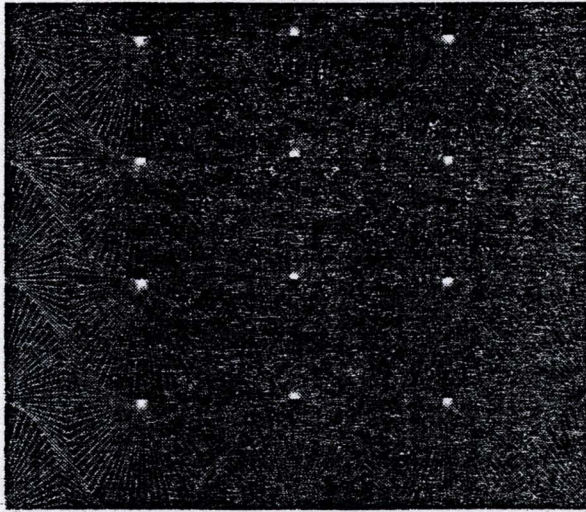
There is a certain irony in the advent of the "Pertaining to Philadelphia" exhibit. For while the art museums in this city have been groping for new ways to mount exhibits of already-familiar works, they have virtually ignored living local artists.

There are those who think the city's 300th birthday celebration should be an occasion for commissioning new works. Others think it should provide a showcase for new talent, while still others expect a bazaar approach in which all aspects of Philadelphia artistic accomplishment would be put on display.

The theme that appears to dominate and shape the "Pertaining to Philadelphia" series curtain-raiser is a focus on small, intimate groupings, as if we were seeing the results of a casual, perhaps even an impromptu, dip into the museum's storage rooms.

The Art Museum possesses and acquires great works of art from many civilizations and many different time periods. Yet it also is the conservator and showcase in Philadelphia for our region's artistic accomplishment. It should constantly be gathering a good representative collection of new work — a collection that tells the story that needs to be told and that captures and holds the interest of visitors, and makes area residents as well as visitors proud of this museum.

It is to be hoped that the museum's series of exhibits may have the added effect of stimulating individuals and corporations to donate or commission major works by living Philadelphia artists. The holding of special art exhibits has always intensified the



A detail from Edna Andrade's 'Night Sea'

awareness of contemporary art and of Philadelphia artists in particular. Special exhibits have stimulated the donation of most of the museum's collection of recent 20th-century art. It is interesting to note that the most frequent donors have been physicians.

There are several rooms of contemporary art in the Art Museum that look basically the same as those of most other U.S. museums, with displays of the work of Frank Stella, Carl Andre, Jasper Johns and Mark Rothko. But there is nothing there that documents important events in the life of our city. The adjoining rooms of non-Philadelphia contemporary painting are a reminder that much attention during our era has centered on the art of display in museums and galleries.

We can readily see that many American artists have responded to this with an art of display (and little else). And so it is that museums began to serve as a parade-ground for artists, and in them we see art's "athletes" going through their paces.

But the Philadelphia work currently being exhibited lacks the whiz-bang aggressiveness we have come to think of as "American-type" abstraction.

In her immaculate, inventive abstract painting, Edna Andrade relies on geometry as a safe haven for abstraction. Representative work by painters Cynthia Carlson, Robert Keyser, John Dowell and sculptor Wade Saunders also seems oddly and almost eccentrically muted compared to the kinds of painting that dominated the '60s in American art as a whole. Such work is on more comfortable terms with the tempo of the '70s, which saw abstract art refined into an instrument for the very subtle expression of individual sensibility.

As for other precincts represented, Martha Mayer Erlebacher, a Realist, has achieved a kind of continuous

productive way of working that has not hardened into a mode. That she is a very good painter of the human countenance we know from her self-portrait in the current exhibit. Lasting reputations have been made with less. But this presentation of her work excludes an important aspect of her career — her contribution to the burgeoning field of narrative, or story-telling painting. The show ignores this aspect of contemporary painting, in Erlebacher's work or anyone else's.

Contemporary folk art trends are reflected in work by Isaiah Zagar and Laurie Kerrigan. Other featured Philadelphia artists are Larry Day, Jerry Crimmins, Barkley Handricks, Ben Kamihira, Tom Hatten, Diane Burko and Anita C. Harris.

Although not considered a part of this exhibit, adjoining rooms display other works acquired since 1965 that are by artists with links to our region: Tom Chimes, Chuck Fahlen, Richard Stankiewicz, Walter D. Bannard and David Smith (who taught at the University of Pennsylvania). Work by other local artists, Franz Kline and Stuart Davis, was acquired earlier in the '60s.

In so many previous roundups of local talent from the permanent collection, living Philadelphia artists found themselves excluded by fiat from the Art Museum's regular exhibition galleries and exhibited instead in out-of-the-way corridors or back stairways.

This practice, which bespeaks a "local inferiority complex" and a downplaying of local artists by the Art Museum and by Penn's Institute of Contemporary Art, is denounced by critic Sid Sachs on the front page of the March issue of Chicago's *New Art Examiner*. In the same issue, Chicago mural painter John Pitman Weber makes a plea for changes nationwide in the art-distribution system that also strikes home.

While Sachs wants Philadelphia art

returned to the main exhibit galleries of our museums (something actually accomplished for the first time this month, and with no fanfare), Weber wants art returned to the people. As Weber sees it, art is too important to be in the hands of the "art world" and its curators and collectors who, if you listen to their jargon, might as well be off on another planet.

Weber zeroes in on the art market, decrying its very existence. He assails it as a broker of socially prestigious objects that depend upon the gross excess of offer over demand, and on the underemployment of the majority of artists. Weber rejects out of hand the way the art market denies art's social function and defuses it in various subtle ways.

He is thus in agreement with art critic Lucy Lippard and with Jerry Kearns that the big challenge today is to develop new forms of art and new ways of distributing it, to explore old forms, and "most important, support each other in our efforts to understand the process of doing so." There is much wisdom in the Weber/Lippard minority viewpoint.

Their view is also relevant to the "Pertaining to" exhibit because it reminds us that even now, when we have reached the long hoped-for point of having good, new Philadelphia art in our Art Museum's choicest display rooms, our work is only just beginning. For such an exhibit, useful as it is, is only a way station on the road to bringing art back into the daily lives of the people of this city. It is about time the Webers and Lippards of the art world begin organizing to bring this about, with our blessing.

Meanwhile, by permanently opening a gallery to Philadelphia artists, the Art Museum has taken another step in its long-range program of becoming more flexible in its services.

By taking this step, the museum has pointed the way to a solution of some old problems and suggested some new and appealing possibilities. We can look forward eagerly to the snowballing impact that a series of "Pertaining to Philadelphia" shows will have. And we can hope for some surprises in the shows now in preparation, with regard to veteran local artists no less than new recruits.