

Brushing the Surface

BY ALICE THORSON

"42nd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting"
At the Corcoran Gallery of Art to
November 10

Given that art-world tastes move to and fro like a pendulum, it stands to reason that after several seasons heavy on mass-media-based work, curators are once again looking at real painting. What Corcoran curator Terrie Sultan has collected for the museum's "42nd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting" engages the eye but stunts the mind, and leaves heart and soul out of things altogether. On the surface, this is good old-fashioned American painting: large in scale, adventurous in its interaction with materials, bold and confident in handling, and magisterial with its drips and sweeps of the brush. The critics—Eric Gibson of the *Washington Times* and Paul Richard of the *Washington Post*—rather like it; many area artists, on the other hand, are unimpressed. Contrary to Gibson's hint that this lack of enthusiasm might be attributed to the exhibit's scant representation of work from this city, what area artists are taking issue with is not their exclusion from the show but with the wishy-washy, wiped-out attitude that permeates much of the work it features.

New Yorker Willy Hecks being the standout among the 13 artists featured, there's some fine painting here, but even the best of it holds little we haven't seen before in the collective repertoire of Julian Schnabel, Sigmar Polke, and Terry Winters. At many a turn one also recognizes snippets of John Torreano and Ross Bleckner, not to mention all manner of borrowings from earlier art ranging from cubism to abstract expressionism. The innovation here (if innovation it may be called, considering how much of the character of this work derives from its positioning with regard to past "isms")



Irene Pijoan's
*The Ganges
at Benares*
(Painting for
Joan Brown)
(1991)

resides in the artists' rejection of postmodernism's ironic attitude toward past art, and what might be termed their post-Baudrillardian revival of faith in art's ability to communicate. Though one would hardly know it from reading the New York art magazines, this faith is something many artists working in the '80s (and certainly most of the artists in Washington, for example) never lost.

What is not "revived" here in any substantive way is significant content, despite curator Sultan's claims in the catalog for these paintings' display of "new intellectual or emotional vigor." Her characterization of their mode of speaking to the viewer as "an approximation of states of sensation, thought, or emotion" is closer to the mark: In fact, an odd sense of retreat haunts the exhibit overall. For all their display of heated colors and painterly bravado, the rooms are rife with veiled messages and an aura of chastened introspection.

A certain intrepid indulgence in decorative effects prevails throughout this exhibit. From Michael Miller's signature blue-and-yellow-striped backdrops to Eldridge Rawls' quietly luminous fields to the rosy rainbow of reds, rusts, and pinks in Sabina Ott's *Disappearance and Return #17*, there is hardly a

piece that resists the temptation to lure the viewer through prettified surfaces or a reassuring repetition of motifs. Layering—of images over edge-to-edge designs as in Andrea Way's work, or over painterly fields and lattices as seen in the work of Irene Pijoan—is another favorite strategy. Yet in peeling back these layers, one rarely penetrates to a decisive kernel of thought. The impression is rather of a dabbling—in ideas, traditions, issues—indicating an awareness of the complicated world beyond the canvas but an inability or reluctance to interact with it in any definite or committed way.

A comparison of this show with the Hirshhorn's recent Awards in the Visual Arts exhibit of contemporary art is instructive, insofar as nearly all of the works in the latter spoke, without equivocating, of their makers' head-on encounter with the problems and evils of contemporary life. If, in some cases, the AVA artists' concern with such content tended to overwhelm visual considerations, on the plus side, one was never moved to question their works' reflection of strongly held personal beliefs.

Abstractionists, for the most part, the painters in the "42nd Biennial" register their encounter with the world around them

through allusive, often ambiguous symbols. If, as Sultan asserts, it is these artists' intention to make "the meaning of this notation contingent in some way upon the viewer instead of presenting self-contained absolutes," one is presumably permitted to interpret, say, Lydia Dona's passages of cubist scaffolding as references to American industrial decay, or the cell-like motifs that appear in many of these works as emblems of a biological world in revolt. However, what is far more interesting than the meanings one might construct around individual works is the trend to place the burden of constructing meaning on the viewer, rather than on the artist.

As the theory and commentary of the visual arts have a long history of borrowing from the discourse of literature, it does not seem a coincidence that the viewer-central approach to the visual arts articulated in the "42nd Biennial" parallels similar developments in the realm of literary criticism. A trademark of the past decade's approach to literature has been what Dinesh d'Souza describes in the March 1991 *Atlantic* as a "denial of inherent textual meaning," such that reader interpretation reigns supreme over an author's intentions for his or her work. The contents of the "Bienni-

al" suggest that many visual artists have interpreted this approach to cultural production as license to simply have no set intentions for their works.

Perhaps this is why many of the works in the "42nd Biennial" appear as so much aesthetically arranged raw data. Where formerly we looked to artists to sort through and make sense of life's barrage, no small number of these artists of the '90s are clearly as overwhelmed by the information assault of the late 20th century as the rest of us. The works' tacit admission of this, which in "progressive" circles is viewed positively as a retreat from authoritarianism, smells suspiciously of a failure of nerve. Certainly it represents a wholesale rejection of the notion of the artist as visionary.

If one concedes (and one should not necessarily do so) that it is a good thing for a show such as this to highlight a tendency rather than showcase diverse examples of an era's best, then to fault Sultan for the state of abstract painting would be the equivalent of shooting the messenger. Alas, this is the work that has been getting a good deal of exposure and attention—for the moment. It is doubtful that a single piece here will stand the test of time.