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For a Broad Landscape, An Equally Wide Survey
By KEN JOHNSON MAY 31, 2006

At this moment in the United States, artists are collectively producing every kind of art imaginable, from the conservatively traditional to the radically conceptual. Critics, curators, gallery owners and historians will filter out most of it in their continuing efforts to discover some meaningful direction, but no one really has a clear view of the big picture. It is too broad, hazy and confusing.

In its own haphazard way, however, the National Academy Museum's "181st Annual" comes close to reflecting accurately the pluralism of art in America. (This year, as it is in alternate years, the show is an invitational made up of works by artists who are not members of the academy.) The eight-member invitational committee did not try to carve a thin slice out of the whole in an effort to represent some important or up-to-date development. Numerous well-known artists are among the 124 selected, including John Chamberlain, Pat Steir and Kiki Smith, but what the committee came up with is a trend-blind cross section. With artists born in every decade from the 1920's to the 1980's, it is, you might say, the anti-Whitney Biennial. It won't make you angry, but neither will it thrill you.

Besides looking all too much as if it were organized by committee, the show has a major problem in its installation. Because so many different styles are represented, and the layout seems to have been determined mainly by the sizes of different works, there is a numbing randomness.

A better idea might have been to group pieces according to style into a series of focused mini-exhibitions. For example, at least a dozen of the show's painters are still drawing inspiration from Abstract Expressionism, producing essays in painterly and emotional spontaneity. Gathering together works of this sort by Judith Murray, Lynne Frehm, Brian Rutenberg and others would provide an occasion not only for comparisons of quality but also for a meditation on what it is that continues to make painterly abstraction so appealing to so many artists.

Geometric abstraction preoccupies another large group of artists who aim not for expressive freedom but for structural order and sensuous calm. These include, most notably, Merrill Wagner, James Little and Helen Miranda Wilson. And, as you would expect of a traditionalist institution like the National Academy, there are many who paint or draw from perceptual experience. Works in this vein include Sylvia Plimack Mangold's Cézannesque painting of a tree; Joan Semmel's slyly aggressive nude self-portrait with a camera; and Margery Beaumont's small, soft-focus, Morandi-like still-life painting.

Providing relief from traditionalist approaches that are too often overly familiar, whether abstract or representational, are those artists involved in more or less comical figurative fantasy, like Alexi Worth, Karl Wirsum, Trevor Winkfield and Llyn Foulkes. Others, including Jim Lutes, Jonathan Lasker and Gordon Powell, put inventive spins on abstraction. The idiosyncratic originality of these artists is something the show needs more of.

One of the few sociologically assertive works is Maren Hassinger's mock-primitivist installation centered on a video in which she paints her own face black to satirize racist stereotyping. Another is Enrique Chagoya's large, cartoon-style charcoal drawing featuring a military helicopter piloted by two Jesus figures; it is from a series called "Road Map" that satirizes President Bush's plans for Middle

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East peace. But the invitational committee members were clearly more interested in visibly skillful handmade approaches than they were in challenging new concepts or ideologies.

There is one other video work, a poetic sculpture by Heidi Kumao in which imagery of flowing, water-borne sediment is projected onto a piece of paper inserted in an old-fashioned typewriter. A multimedia corner installation of Constructivist forms, found objects and a glowing black light by Phong Bui also adds to the impression that, however tentatively, the academy is trying to cultivate some openness to nontraditional forms.

Sculpture, for some reason, is the most consistently high-quality part of the show. Mr. Chamberlain's tangle of colorful strips of auto-body metal; Kathy Butterly's lovely little, funky-surrealist ceramic vessel; Richard Rezac's sleek, subtly eccentric construction of wood and metal; and Tony Feher's hanging configuration of small glass jars with a red marble in each: these, along with works by Lynda Benglis, Garth Evans and Tom Burckhardt, would make an excellent small sculpture show.

If the two-dimensional works had been selected as discerningly, the whole annual might have been a terrific exhibition. But then it would not be so democratic.