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By Michael Brenson

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"Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum" is important for its art and instructive about where exhibitions of this high level of intelligence and provocation should take place. It brings together 13 artists, 11 of them women, who are involved with media other than traditional painting and sculpture. Many use words. The esthetic is one of action, impermanence and change.

"We have deliberately focused on the 'first generation,' so to speak, of Afro-American artists who have explored video, performance and installation," write the curators, Leslie King-Hammond and Lowery S. Sims, in the catalogue. Ms. King-Hammond is the dean of graduate studies at the Maryland Institute's College of Art in Baltimore, which organized the show. Ms. Sims is a curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum.

The exhibition is part uptown, part downtown, and it seems like two different shows. Eight artists are represented at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where the show is a complete success. Seven are at the Metropolitan Life Gallery, just off Madison Square Park, where the show is a failure. (Two artists, David Hammons and Faith Ringgold, have work at both locations.) At the Studio Museum, where the space is welcoming, the tone is consistent and the art maintains its edge. The blend of faith and iconoclasm, tenderness and anger, disappointment and affirmation, creates a poignancy that is at times almost overwhelming. Bridges between past and present, pre-industrial and industrial culture, are everywhere.

The title of Betye Saar's "Mojotech" runs together modern technology and ancient ritual. This terrific installation includes a small altar in front of a cityscape pieced together with candles, threads and batteries. The skyscrapers in the center seem to have been constructed by piling together large handmade computer chips: everything in Ms. Saar's world is human scale. One of her surprising insights is that technology is not an obliteration but an extension of magic.

Adrian Piper is a performance and video artist who often incorporates the written word. Two of her four works are videos. One is a 40th birthday installation, complete with cast-off armor, baseballs (symbols of the "hardball" she has had to play) and an unending festive dance in which the artist keeps facing a white wall. There are two charcoals of naked blacks and whites - drawn over articles in *The New York Times* about racial conflict - from the "Vanilla Nightmare" series. The title suggests the sweet disruptiveness that is one characteristic of Ms. Piper's work.

There is nothing at the Studio Museum that is not engaging. Mr. Hammons's small, theatrically lighted sculpture, suspended from the wall like an African idol, consists of six chicken bones wrapped in gold chains - a tasty yet biting tribute to 125th Street, where the artist has lived for 10 years. Senga Nengudi's wall installation of sheets of blue and pink toilet paper, some covered with cosmic symbols, was inspired by ripped posters announcing the recent appearance of Yolanda King, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter, at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Maren Hassinger's "Weeds No. 1," with its twilight earth, its mixture of upright and stunted cables and its intimations of the fossil crowds of Nancy Graves is a sorrowful marathon dance. "The Bending of Osa Nyin," by Charles Abramson, who died last year, is a powerful wall installation with a bird god surrounded by photographs of dead people the artist had known. On the floor are 43 photographs of him, commemorating his 43 years.

At the Metropolitan Life Gallery, it is a different story. The Metropolitan Life Foundation is one of the sponsors, and the Met Life Gallery had planned to present the entire exhibition. In part because the show was too large, however, the Studio Museum was able to take half of it.

With its pink marble floor, black marble columns and high white walls, the tomblike Met Life Gallery is inhospitable. In addition, the gallery refused to show the political provocations of Ms. Piper and Howardena Pindell. It would not take Mr. Hammons's "How You Like Me Now," a wall drawing of Jesse Jackson with blond hair and blue eyes standing beside the American flag. A Metropolitan Life official said these works "would have been too controversial."

As a result, however, the show makes no sense. Mr. Hammons's sarcasm would probably have mobilized the kind of response, however heated, that could have established some kind of bridge between the exhibition and the general public. Without it, almost all the works, including the beaded sculptures of Joyce J. Scott, the quilts of Ms. Ringgold, the ritualistic installation by Kaylynn Sullivan and the ceramic wall piece by Martha Jackson-Jarvis seem like marginal curiosities. At the Studio Museum, "Art as a Verb" is inspired. At the Metropolitan Life Gallery, it is a mistake.

"Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum" remains at the Metropolitan Life Gallery, 24 East 24th Street, through tomorrow, and at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, through June 18. Anish Kapoor Barbara Gladstone Gallery 99 Greene Street Through April 29.

In his new sculptures, Anish Kapoor has gone further than he has before in exploring sculptural illusionism. In three of the four works, the primary material is stone. Each limestone, sandstone or slate monolith has a hole, window or slit through which we seem to be staring into a secret chamber coated with the powdered pigment for which this 35-year-old Indian-born artist, living in London since 1971, may be best known.

The powder dematerializes the mass, confusing interior and exterior, hard and soft, male and female. The surface of the stone seems to be transformed into skin. The chambers seem like black holes without beginning or end. The darkness is mesmerizing. "Adam" is an upright monolith whose interior seems to be a wonderland in which we can easily get lost.

The most dramatic sculpture, "Void No. 2," is not stone but Fiberglas. The powder makes the interior of this hemisphere, roughly seven and a half feet in diameter, seem infinite and weightless - pure, concentrated blue-black space. It is the kind of magical, disconcerting sculpture that undoes vision and logic, pointing toward forces inside and outside us that we barely understand. John Heliker Kraushaar Gallery 724 Fifth Avenue (near 57th Street) Through April 29

John Heliker is 80 years old and still producing works that reveal his pleasure in painting. His subjects -interiors, seascapes and still lifes -remain essentially the same. His paintings continue to be characterized by an enormous discretion and reserve. His world continues to be at the same time unstable and unchanging. His paintings remain very European in compositional structure and very American in their modest, plain-speaking tone.

The clarity and assertiveness of these paintings seem greater than before. With all the vagueness of faces and the grayness of light, and with all the gestural freedom of the walls and skies, everything is set down with a certainty that makes them seem inevitable. Windows, bedposts, sofas, tables fall into place and take on a solidity that the people do not have. While faces seem to have either just emerged from or just sunk back into memory, the objects of daily life seem more than ever there. The experience of loss and the sense of the weight of things are very much what these paintings are about.