

'Peripheral Stretch' at Ampersand International Arts

If nothing else, *Peripheral Stretch*, a curious three-person show at Ampersand International Arts, goes against the grain of current techie art trends. Its three emerging artists share a penchant for no-frills painting and arguably a return to some halcyon pre-Renaissance era when painters rendered their personal, cultural and (even) formalist visions on wood panels. If the concept comes replete with a faint anti-technology aura that reappears every so often in western art (Pre-Raphaelites, Art Nouveau, etc.) or might strike one as a slightly retro ploy of a curator in search of a theme, the results yield more than its premise might proffer on paper.

Robert Gutierrez is far and away the most gifted painter of this motley trio. Gutierrez gives free rein to a polymorphous sensibility as he adroitly renders

lush, mutant miniaturist floating worlds atop small pieces of plywood. The sinuous grains skirting through these small, nude slabs generate indeterminate space on which to plant his fanciful bio-mechanical botanical gardens. (The way one recalcitrant third-grader who shall remain nameless stuck decals of "Star Trek" characters to the sides of his old wooden desk.) Occasional touches of submerged glitter help lend a colorful murky never-never land sheen while enhancing the dynamic tension between flat two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional illusionistic depth. (Ditto for the way the artist's meticulously rendered images, painted like pasted decals or collage elements on top of the panels, also contributes to this fertile push-and-pull.)

Teeming with tentacles, shells, mollusks, spores, (really wild) flowers, giant mushrooms, ballooning breast pods, animated olive-eyes and sundry bulbous shapes, the resulting images bring to mind the womb architecture of Antonio Gaudi and some bizarre Hieronymus Boschian fantasyscapes minus the menace and overt sexuality. Even the humorous

surreal titles

(*Mammary Moonpie*, *Bubble Gum Tower*, *Carmine Glitterati*)

play their part in the overall zany polymorphism. While some of the painter's wispy palimpsests are fully realized whimsical floating worlds, others are mere schematic thumbnail sketches. If the nearly two dozen small panels are often hung (or grouped) too tightly together,

Dymaxion emerges as one of the real standouts. Set against a diaphanous (and faintly Chinese-looking) landscape, this rococo-surrealist hybrid finds the painter's blustery biomorphism in full bloom: tentacled flowers sprout from opaque geodesics while gelatinous mushrooms house alien-O'Keeffe bouquets.

If Gutierrez's trippy floating worlds can't be easily located within any particular time or place (other than

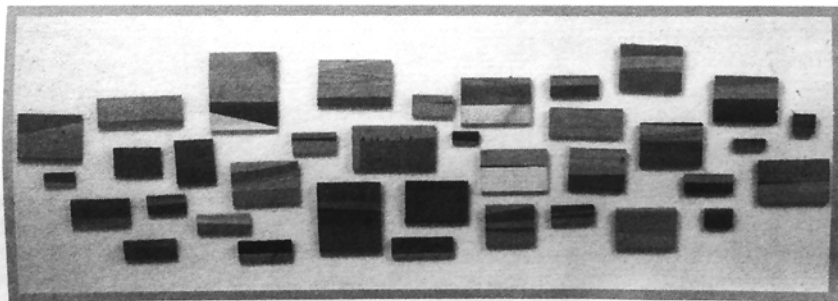
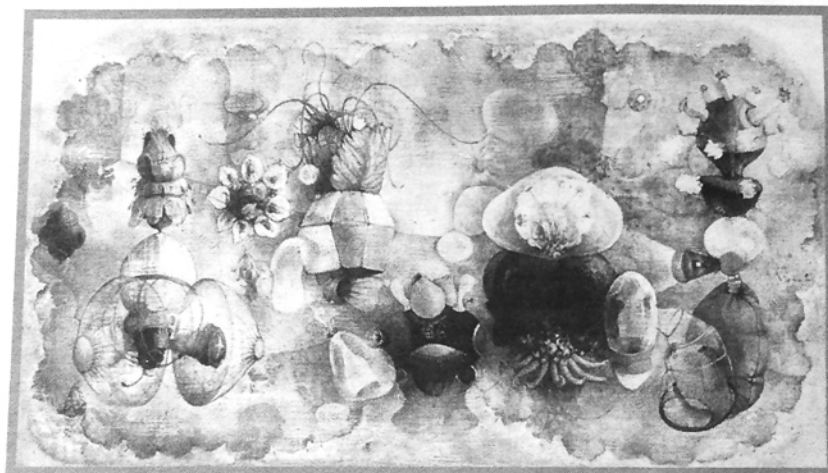
during the Summer of Love), R.E. Sanchez's compelling craft-oriented conundrums stem from an industrial landscape overlaid by post-World War III American popular culture. Echoing wood variants of Stella's early shaped canvases that hover handsomely between painting, sculpture, furniture and architecture, Sanchez's large-shaped, plywood segmented panels play off the geometric and organic, the industrial and natural as they invert the traditional surface area accorded to painted surface and negative space. One is often drawn more to the bare wood background than the Spartan fragmented images floated on top (a few panels are given simple yet elegant stains while silvery nail heads stud the surfaces throughout), Sanchez's pared-down panels morph into an austere yet zesty brand of Pop Conceptual Minimalism. Portions of a (dis)jointed panel might be slathered with slightly toxic industrial hues that evoke Ellsworth Kelly's flat color-fields, covered with a serrated Clyfford Still fluorescent orange gauze and overlaid with disembodied body parts seemingly lifted from a Mel Ramos pin-up (e.g., a pair of curvaceous legs in stiletto heels).

Unlike Sanchez and Gutierrez, the exhibition's third painter pretty much purges references to the human figure along with most other animals, vegetables and minerals. Though not without merit, Jeff Morris's (site-specific) Diebenkornesque abstractions on scavenged shelving wood represent *Peripheral Stretch's* weakest link. He "rescues," paints, then places lost-and-found pieces of wood in plastic bags that lend the specimens a foggy, deliquescent glint. Yet while many individual pieces hold their own (e.g., *H & M Shores*, with its light blue and bright aqua swathes tempered by purple mist) the whole isn't greater than the sum of its parts in this thirty-six piece bric-a-brac. Hung at skewed angles in a thrift-store cluster, the result is a jigsaw-jumble that contains too much deadwood. Perhaps the cock-eyed angles are supposed to suggest a flotsam and jetsam buoyancy, but the severe geometry imposed on the irregularly shaped wood just doesn't jell. One senses Morris is heading somewhere with this idea but hasn't quite arrived yet. We'll just have to wait and see if he, along with Gutierrez and Sanchez, continues to knock on wood.

—Harry Roche

Peripheral Stretch: Robert Gutierrez, Jeff Morris, R.E. Sanchez closed November 3 at Ampersand International Arts, San Francisco.

Harry Roche is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.



From top: Robert Gutierrez, *Dymaxion*, 1999, oil on wood, 15" x 23"; Jeff Morris, installation view, 2000, plastic bags, shelving wood, 30" x 95"; R. E. Sanchez, *Accidentally. And was Never Moved if ...*, 2000, acrylic, indian ink on wood, 24" x 101", at Ampersand International Arts, San Francisco.