



art

'X' Marks the Spot

By SUSAN ZWINGER

Last week, as I cruised the aesthetic arteries of Los Angeles, trying to discover its pulse and source of vitality, I quickly learned that doors would open mystically for me whenever I mentioned Santa Fe. Eyes would glaze over, breath would be sucked in—a dangerous act in LA—and transcendent states would instantly be achieved by the Angelenos. "Isn't that a very strong center for The Arts?" they would inevitably ask. At this I would stammer, perspire and belch, then mumble something incoherently, not wanting to be dishonest, but, at the same time, not wanting to dispel a highly profitable myth.

The reason for my ambivalent response is that I am essentially cynical about the Santa Fe art scene—and with good reason. In the past three years, three of our most innovative galleries have closed—Hill's (1982), Heydt-Bair (1983) and Eason (1984). This, coupled with the fact that last year's Festival of the Arts was received coolly by the arts community (because it did not generate the big bucks) and that the aesthetic here continues to be dominated by commercialism, has instilled a brand of cynicism in me that would make art-and-social critic Tom Wolfe blush.

But ironically, within 24 hours of my return to this tri-cultural nirvana, I found myself totally unbiassed and "de-cynicized" by one of the most exciting exhibitions to take place since the rebellious Armory shows of yesteryear—and fittingly, it took place at the Armory for the Arts.

"Space X," as it is called, was generated in less than 30 days, opened last Friday night with punk rock bands and an in-house video of the crowd (an art event itself), and will run through March 5. Under the loose guidance of Nancy Sutor and Stuart Ashman, a former Armory exhibitions designer, the most innovative and experimental work of 40 artists—many of whom are not shown locally—coalesced. As Sutor so aptly pointed out, the goals of "saleability" are not necessarily consistent with the creative process. In fact, galleries tend to demand a certain amount of "expectability" from their artists, while the creative process tends to produce the unexpected, driving gallery staffs right up the wall and art critics out of their "isms."

Overall, "Space X" is one of the healthiest and most exciting innovations to be seen in town in recent memory. But lest the reader think that LA pollution has affected my judgment, I should quickly add that the works on display are very uneven. The bad news first.

Poor craftsmanship is the handmaiden to the quick-and-furious school of self-expression. This exhibition generated passionate swirls of paint, ill-chopped hunks of wood, dangerously hung swirls of neon, and peculiar hunks of Rubber Lady-like paraphernalia. The general installation itself, comprising works of such variety, at first appeared to be more closely related to the hardware and appliance section of Albuquerque's largest Goodwill outlet than a fine arts exhibit.

Secondly, politics came through as a heavy-handed theme. References to the poverty in Poland, jet bombers, pollution, sex, destruction and war in the Middle-East abounded and smacked of the tone of '60s art. Somewhere within these pieces there crept the belligerent conviction that by merely making images of these tragedies, we can somehow cure them.

Now for the positive. First of all, "Space X" allowed plenty of room for innovation, experimentation and discovery, permitting each artist to operate independently from one another. (There was much less conformity here than in the downtown warehouse galleries of Los Angeles.) Stuart Ashman's large work on canvas, which was stretched by tree limbs and binder's twine, cast the viewer adrift on a sea full of associations.

Mary Kanda's layered-glass pyramids looked like nothing we ever saw before. About 2 feet high and 10 inches wide, these works offered different images that overlapped. In one, a fashion model in a leopard-skin dress merged with a camouflaged bomber, also on a spotted background. Because the second image took a few moments to notice, Kanda's message did not become too heavy-handed. Another protest piece—but raised to the level of fine art through its use of fine, handmade paper—was Rose Marie Prins' "P.S.—T.S. (Toxic Shock): Five Females in Protest." This work depicted five female genitals covered with a gauze that is made up of a mysterious fiber.

Then there were examples of beautiful craftsmanship. Ron Pokrasso's renderings of male nudes were exquisite. Of pure wonderment were Erika Wanemacher's "Fat Guy" and "Cat's Mouth." These two works were wooden carvings involving exteriors opening wide to expose the interiors of entire environments. As pieces of three-dimensional surrealism, they were clever and full of meaning.

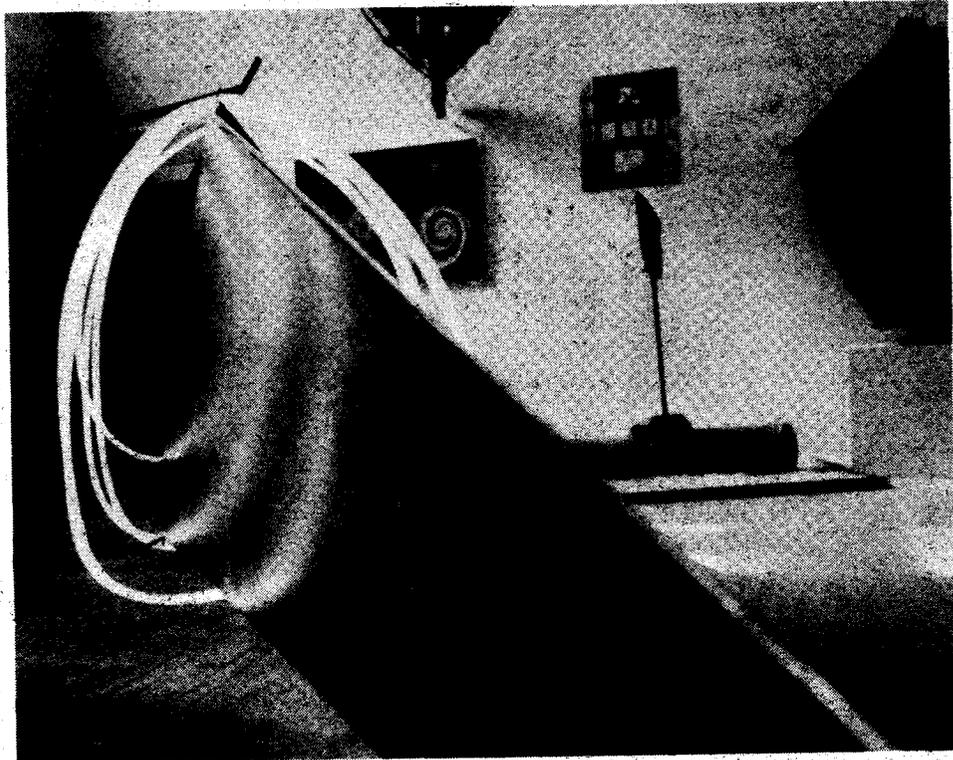
Then there was humor: black humor, white humor, handicapped humor. Sam Lemly's "Wheel Chair" was a good-natured spoof of this last concept, as the artist constructed a Jungle Gym-like structure covered with wheels and culminating in four toilet plungers. David Pratt's "Keyhole"—a cluttered conglomerate of ribbons, buckles, buttons, lids and broken toys—referred to northern New Mexico icons. A dark brand of women's humor appeared in Prins' "Rape," which brought a smile to one of the most unfunny of all subjects: A beautiful piece of handmade paper, with an oval slit in the middle of it, was affixed to the wall by means of a large spike.

Playfulness of a purely visual kind was present in David Anderson's 20-foot steel structures, complete with lightweight delicate neon loops of light, hung about the middle like giant phosphorescent Hula-Hoops.

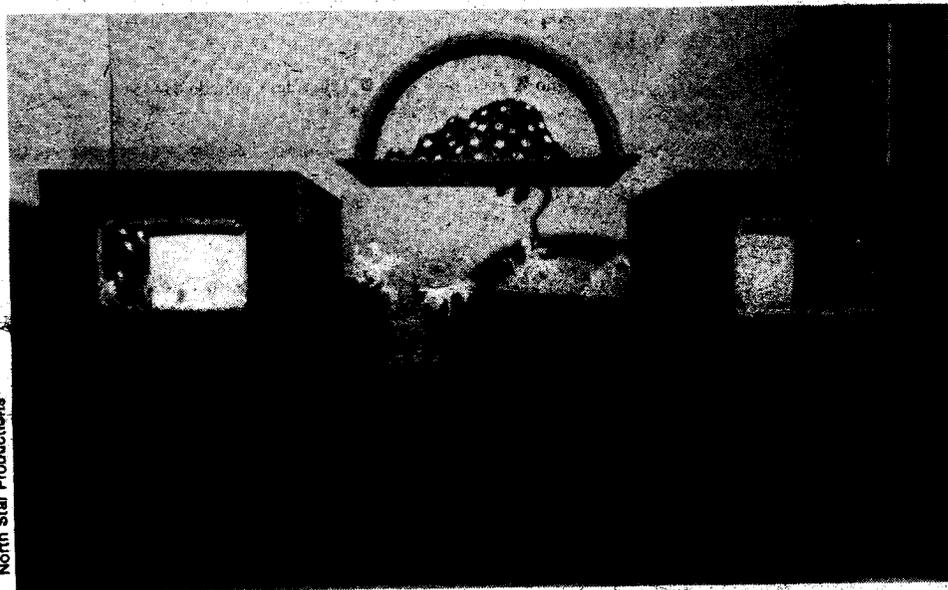
Finally, there was one work that touched and lightened the heart: Video artist Steina Vasulka and Cerrillos artist Jerry Wood have collaborated on a video/installation that explores the crazy, cross-cultural conglomeration of Southwestern myths and truths. Flying horses float in a circle over a mirror and under a mythic butte near Cerrillos, which is represented by a black lizard with white spots. Within two boxes filled with white and spotted horses and red chilis, two video screens show pans of earthy New Mexico scenes, both real and as represented in West's paintings. On the video soundtrack, fragments of Southwestern wisdom are interspersed with spoken dialogue: "Our diseases are our attachments"; "We are unaware of our own destruction."

Sutor aptly contradicted my attempts to find an overall theme or plan to "Space X." "There is no 'scene' here," she said. "Just a strong zeitgeist, a lot of separate and distinctive parts coming together simultaneously. We are very free to do what we must do here in Santa Fe."

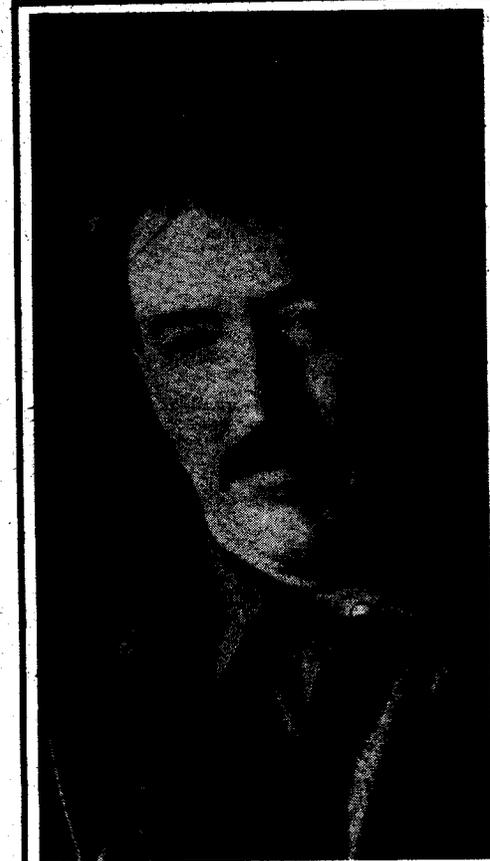
Eat your heart out, LA!



David Anderson's neon sculpture . . .



... And the Vasulka-West video installation: Finally, a bit of innovation on the scene



Paul Butterfield

A Date With the Blues

Paul Butterfield, the legendary blues man himself, will perform in concert this Sunday night at the James A. Little Auditorium on the campus of the School for the Deaf. Appearing with Butterfield will be the jazz-pop group, Kilimanjaro.

Butterfield first made a national name for himself in 1965, when his milestone album, "The Paul Butterfield Blues Band," introduced teenagers of white America to the blues. So influential was his work that eventually every important rock group from then on included blues or blues-derivative numbers in their sets. But perhaps his most important contribution to rock in the '60s was that day, in 1965, that he and his band backed Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival—the day Dylan went electric.

The concert will begin at 9:30 p.m. and advance tickets can be purchased at The Candyman and Music 'n' More for \$11. Tickets can also be purchased at the door for \$12.50.