

# As Sprawling As Brooklyn Itself

By DAVID COHEN

Like Brooklyn itself, "Open House: Working in Brooklyn" at the Brooklyn Museum is sprawling, teeming. And the exhibition, like the borough, has countless treasures and surprises, but finding your way around either of them can test your endurance.

"Open House" is a survey of works made since 2000 by around 200 artists who work in Brooklyn, many in the production powerhouses of DUMBO and Williamsburg — the Montmartre and Montparnasse of the American art world. Though it is graced by such eminence as Louise Bourgeois — who opened a Brooklyn studio in 1980 — and Vito Acconci, most of the artists in this show are 40-something or under.

The Brooklyn Museum has a proud history of supporting contemporary

modernism. It contrasts radically with, say, the sensibility of their British counterparts, presented at the Brooklyn Museum several years ago in "Sensation." There, the tendency is to farm out fabrication and strive towards cool aloofness; in Brooklyn, the homegrown aesthetic is a kind of cottage conceptualism.

Often this is coupled with intense diaristic personalism. Danica Phelps, for instance, chronicles her love life in spindly doodles while keeping absurdist statistical tabs on herself. Beth Campbell elaborates dense but neat flow diagrams of speculative eventualities that might arise from minor life incidents. Both women play a very knowing game: Their works give off a cool sweat.

The most engaging and justly celebrated artists in this show, however,

talities of scale that inspires awe.

Even the most lyrical and painterly artist in this show, Amy Sillman, is a master of fuss and fiddle. The same characteristics also come across in likeable paintings and drawings by Jane Fine, Danny Simmons, Danielle Tegeder, Mark Dean Veca, Su-En Wong, and Kevin Zucker.

It is not that the artists' touch is important as such. The markmaking isn't expressive or masterly so much as it is a solipsistic accumulation of minutiae. In the case of the best artists, such obsessiveness ushers in the marvelous. In lesser hands, the result is a grungy kind of navel-gazing.

But none of the artists shines more brightly for being hung in proximity to worthy travelers along similar paths. Steven Charles's mesmerizing, chromatically and compositionally bewildering lines of enamel paint close in uncomfortably upon Mr. Pearson's visual and conceptual space. Mr. Brody, meanwhile, keeps nervous company with Diana Cooper's installation of brilliant red circuitry — a kind of homemade Sol LeWitt gone haywire.

It is extraordinary how, among the 200 artists here, virtually no one but Louise Belcourt makes art that gives in to generous expanses of shape or color.

There are many artists who humorously critique or debunk abstraction and reduction — Stephen Sollins's Richard Tuttle-esque "Elegy (Holly)" (2003) has colored rectangles sewn into a napkin, Elana Herzog's decomposing chenille bedspread is a droll deconstruction of action painting — but generally it's as if, from the Brooklyn point of view, neither Abstract Expressionism nor Minimalism ever happened.

Ultimately, "Open" is a curatorial overload of works that are mostly, themselves, about overload. Perhaps the museum would have done better to initiate a new Biennial for Brooklyn, taking pressure off curators and space alike to "get" Brooklyn right in a single exhibition. But actually, what we really need from the Brooklyn Museum is what New York most sorely misses: a venue for mid-career retrospectives of our best artists. For all its faults, "Open" presents many worthy homegrown candidates for the honor.

*"Open House: Working in Brooklyn" at the Brooklyn Museum until August 2004 (200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, 718-638-5831).*



Louise Belcourt, 'Hedge Painting #3' (2003).

art, dating back to the Gallery for Living Artists established in the 1930s. In the early 1980s, the museum picked up the beat from a series of artist-led initiatives, establishing a series of "Working in Brooklyn" shows, of which the current survey is a culmination.

"Open House," curated by Charlotta Kotik and Tunelo Mosaka (respectively chair and assistant curator of the Brooklyn Museum's department of contemporary art), was several years in the making and has generated considerable buzz. The Brooklyn art world is characterized by old-fashioned camaraderie, and with eyes from around the world focused on its burgeoning galleries and open-studio seasons, there was a healthy curiosity about whether a group aesthetic would emerge.

On the evidence of this ambitious show, there is indeed a Brooklyn aesthetic, and it is one that makes good sense of its locale. As the introduction mentions, Brooklyn is characterized by working-class neighborhoods that are close to light manufacturing districts. The Brooklyn look is similarly labor-intense.

Unfortunately, seeing this show is hard work for the viewer, too. While the museum is to be commended for giving such space to this potentially historic venture, and the curators were right to insist on more than one

are all involved in an almost mystical absorption in facture. These include Bruce Pearson, with his gaudily painted Styrofoam reliefs of psychedelically warped lettering; Fred Tomaselli, with his trippy, visionary, Arcimboldo-like collages; and David Brody, with his architectonically remorseless wall drawings.

Similarly, the serial accumulators in this show are artists who have put in their hours: Linda Ganjian has created a Tantric spread of obsessively arranged mixed-media confectionery. In the work of Leonardo Drew — with his rich, dense, ceiling-scraping stack of vitrined cast-paper objects — it is as much the minuteness of touch as the monumen-

