Art in Review

Trace

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria
120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street
Through Nov. 12

Most of the pieces in "Trace" recall works from the 1970's by artists like Alice Aycock and Siah Armajani, who reacted to 60's-style formalism by creating quasi-architectural, environmental sculptures evoking historical, psychological and mythic associations. The six artists in this mostly intriguing show continue in that vein, with an emphasis on memory. The exhibition was organized by Shamim M. Momin, director of the Whitney's Altria gallery.

Karyn Olivier's "Junglegym," an expansive, open, cagelike construction with multiple ladders all neatly made of slender wooden poles, was inspired by early-20th-century steel playground structures, which viewers of a certain age may remember from their own childhoods. It looks more dreamy than the real thing, though; it could be an hommage to Giacometti's great Surrealist sculpture "The Place at Four A.M."

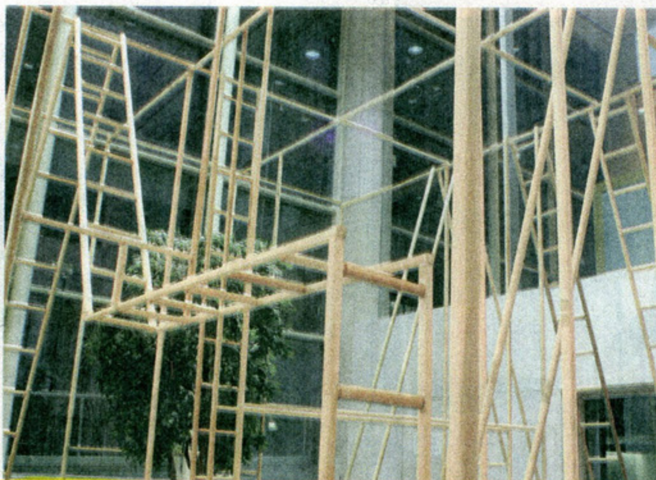
For his massive white plaster sculptures, Karlis Rekevic takes casts from parts of old bridges, traffic dividers, signposts and other functional pieces of the urban landscape. He reassembles these parts in configurations that look almost but not quite functional, and he outfits them with rows of glowing light bulbs that enhance their spectral, theatrical qualities.

Iván Navarro's "Die Again (Monument for Tony Smith)" is a 12-foot black plywood cube that alludes to Tony Smith's famous cube-shape, Minimalist sculpture, "Die." Enter a doorway, move spirally, and you arrive at a dark inner chamber, where the five neon-lighted points of a white star built into the floor under glass appear to recede infinitely downward because of built-in mirrors. Meanwhile, a sweet, mournful voice sings the Beatles song "Nowhere Man." The references are nonspecific, but this movingly funereal work implicitly comments on misguided leadership, blind patriotism and endless war.

Another mysterious wooden sculpture is Michael Queenland's oversize shelving unit, based on plans from a Shaker how-to manual. With its stark, clunky presence, it is vaguely menacing, like a piece of household furniture that a child might encounter in a nightmare.

In the context of this show, works by Jedediah Caesar and Shannon Ebner are less persuasive. Mr. Caesar mixes studio dust and detritus with resin, which he casts into large discs whose associations remain uncertain. And Ms. Ebner's complicated and obscure project includes photographs of hands holding up signs bearing cryptic slogans in front of Washington monuments, and a mural-scale photograph of concrete blocks stacked into what is supposed to be a temporary, unofficial memorial wall. To parody official memorial art is a good idea; Ms. Ebner's work just needs sharper focus.

KEN JOHNSON



George Hirose/Dunn & Brown Contemporary

Return to the playground: Karyn Olivier's "Junglegym," from "Trace," at the Altria gallery of the Whitney.

Partial Recall

Lehmann Maupin
540 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 25

"Partial Recall" offers an engaging, diversified selection of works by eight artists that range in mood from comic to tragic. Memory is the loose thematic thread tying them all together.

On the funny side are Jeffrey Valance's nutty, faux-antique personal reliquaries. His neatly made painted wood and glass boxes display objects supposedly from his own past, like the broken top of an Orange Crush bottle and the thigh bone of a chicken named Blinky. The stories behind these objects are told in amusing, Thurberesque texts.

In a more minimalist spirit, Emma Kay's digital prints display typewritten summaries of three plays by Shakespeare inaccurately recalled from personal memory. And in a socially satiric vein, Mike Kelley's "Memory Ware Flat," a large panel bearing hundreds of pieces of cheap metal jewelry, ponders the sentimental value people invest in consumerist junk.

Veering toward the sad end of the spectrum, Kutlug Ataman's "Cinderella and the Virgin" presents pairs of video interviews with people from an Istanbul ghetto: orphaned children on one television, and a depressed mother surrounded by children on the other. And Juergen Teller's evocative color photographs show bleached glimpses of Nazi ruins in Nuremberg.

Bohemian romance is promoted by Dash Snow's enlarged blurry Polaroids of his young friends behaving wildly, while Michael Vasquez's impressionistic paintings based on photographs of people and scenes from his own gangster past invoke the myth of the outlaw artist. And in nostalgic, sweetly illustrative paintings by Christian Curiel, children act out poetic allegories about moral conflict and death.

KEN JOHNSON

Lehmann Maupin Gallery

Odd reliquary: Jeffrey Valance's "Orange Crush," at Lehmann Maupin.

Andromeda Hotel

The Art of Joseph Cornell

Case Studies

Art in a Valise

Katonah Museum of Art
Route 22 at Jay Street, Katonah, N.Y.
Through Sept. 17

Two shows — one of some 45 collages, chests, cabinets and other objects made by Joseph Cornell from the 1930's to the 60's, the other a group exhibition of works on the theme of suitcases — fit together nicely in this small but lively museum.

Travel is the theme of the Cornell show, which among much else contains a number of images relating to French hotels and more exotic destinations. Although Cornell never left the United States, he translated his dreams of faraway places into delicate, sometimes overly precious works that have a sense of longing.

The white-painted, weathered interior of a box titled "Grand Hotel — Hotel Taglioni" (1954) contains incongruous elements of collage, among them an old ad for a French bakery topped by a color cutout of the ballerina Marie Taglioni, an object of Cornell's adoration, whose Italian home, the Villa Taglioni, still stands on Lake Como. Even simpler, but equally dreamy, is another weathered box, "Hotel de l'Étoile" (1950), which holds only a long, vertical image of a deep blue sky rife with thousands of tiny pinpoints of light.

One of the show's most striking images is a surreal photograph of Cornell by Lee Miller in which he is seen gazing upward, entranced, his shoulder adorned with a miniature sailboat (around 1935).

The link between Cornell and the suitcase show is furthered by the presence in the group exhibition of Cornell's "Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice)" (1943), a carry-case of photographs and documents related to a fictional woman whose life he conjured up. Also here is Marcel Duchamp's "Boite-en-Valise" ("Box in a Suitcase"), which functions as a small portable museum with miniature reproductions of 69 well-known Duchamp works, for which Cornell produced archival boxes.

Other artists include Joseph Beuys, Mona Hatoum, Christian Marclay, Tony Oursler and members of the Fluxus Collective. The range is from Ms. Hatoum's grim "Traffic," whose two old suitcases joined by a flow of dark human hair conjure an image of human trafficking, to Yoan Capote's comic "Nostalgia," a suitcase full of bricks.

A surprise of a sort is Mr. Oursler's eerie work, "Anvil," a talking head projected by video on a doll recumbent in a suitcase. Over and over, it repeats the words: "Breathe in, now breathe out. It will never end."

GRACE GLUECK

Hans Richter (1888-1976)

Dada: Art and Anti-Art

Maya Stendhal Gallery
545 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through Sept. 16

Hans Richter might have been a great avant-garde filmmaker, but the late abstract paintings and reliefs that dominate this partial yet dauntingly large survey of his work feel like well-made acts of desperation. Dating mostly from the last three decades of his long life, they suggest that Richter the object-maker didn't have much to say but couldn't stop saying it.

His commitment to painting began when he saw Manet's work in Berlin in 1904. Within a few years he was working in a German Expressionist style. By 1916 he had landed in Switzerland and hooked up with the Zurich Dadaists, and was soon making portraits in a dark studio to disorient his sense of shape and color. The trick worked. Two bright, nearly abstract off-kilter works in the sprawling Dada exhibition currently at the Museum of Modern Art have a jangling, period-piece beauty.

But Richter found himself as an artist when he began experimenting with film. In Berlin in the 1920's he made several short, gorgeous contributions to the canon of avant-garde cinema. His "Rhythm 21" (1921), an elegant, geometric animated short that was among the earliest abstract films — as well as Op Art before the fact — is in the Stendhal show. Even better is the delirious "Ghosts Before Breakfast" (1927), an inventive, briskly syncopated exemplar of Surrealist elegance, insinuation and layering, dominated by a skittering trio of bowler hats. (It can also be seen at MoMA, drafted into Dada.)

Dada aside, Richter was very much a formalist, or a structuralist, aided by a sophisticated sense of visual humor first glimpsed, at Stendhal, in a series of small, quickly drawn caricatures of friends from his Zurich years. He played every cinematic option, including jump-cutting, slow motion, still images, blurred focus, zooms, negative and reversed sequences, lighting effects. (After immigrating to the United States in 1941, he worked for 14 years as director of the aptly named Institute of Film Techniques at City College.) At Stendhal, a few appealing abstract paintings from the late 1950's navigate an intriguing route between Mondrian and Abstract Expressionism with calligraphic lines and a palette of black, white, red and green. But just about everything else is some kind of pastiche. Sublimated into objects, without film's fluid, mercurial possibilities, Richter's formalist intelligence pushed forward on automatic pilot.

ROBERTA SMITH

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"After the Dull Knife Fight" (around 1897) by…

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Stories From a Writer Devoted to Discovering a Shape in Life's Ceasele…

By PATRICIA COHEN

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