



Museum of Contemporary Art

It took artist Jan Henle and Puerto Rican laborers eight months to clear the land for "La Jibarita."

Probing the Nature of Contemporary Art

ART REVIEW

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

The number of artists has vastly multiplied since the '60s. By now it appears each generation gets an ever-shrinking morsel of the expressive pie. The Museum of Contemporary Art's current Focus Series exhibition "Dove Bradshaw / Jan Henle" provides a pointed albeit paradoxical example.

The otherwise-unrelated pair are both born New Yorkers, about 50, and not particularly well-known in these parts. If they worked in traditional representational media, they'd probably be landscape painters. Imaginatively, Henle's work looks like the best he could do after art's muse gave him just the parched earth under the figure in Andrew Wyeth's popular "Christina's World." Henle seems to have photographed the dirt, blown the prints up to 6-foot squares and called them "film drawings."

A half-dozen variations on view come under the thematic title "La Jibarita" followed by a designating numeral. All compositions are relatively identical variations on a single field of dry, russet-red, barren earth. The pictures function less like photographs than as minimalist paintings.

The rules for viewing such art are well-established. Since there appears to be almost nothing to see, viewers are required to do more than just look. Even staring doesn't do the trick. You really have to trip out. Having achieved the required state of self-hypnosis, each work reveals a certain individuality. One takes on a fairly uniform texture, filling its space like a solid wall. Another scoops back into depth and undulates like water. A third approximates the hip of a reclining nude. Everything loses scale. You can't tell if you're looking at small stuff greatly enlarged or big stuff hugely reduced.

Given that, the real surprise of this work comes not from contemplating it but from reading the explanatory catalog essay by Nancy Princenthal. It informs us that Henle achieved this work in Puerto Rico, where he has a house. It was done by entirely hand-clearing an acre of lushly overgrown hillside. Working with some local laborers, Henle took eight months to denude the land.

The essay explains that the artist, motivated by his interest in various forms of mysticism, wanted to make a work about emptiness. Expending such effort to arrive at such a contradictory result may well have been a profoundly meaningful adventure for Henle. Unfortunately, the resulting art is largely mute residue. If that's the conscious intent, then the pieces are about life and art as an exercise in futility. The only redemption is the heroism of an absurd gesture. Maybe that's right. One is reminded of the film "Fitzcarraldo."

Bradshaw's art shares Henle's leanings to internal discrepancy. Like him, she works with nature but, according to a catalog essay by Los Angeles Times music critic Mark Swed, her principal inspirations are the urbane Marcel Duchamp and Dadaist composer John Cage.

The common ground between Bradshaw and her muses appears to be the idea of allowing art to more or less make itself. She achieves a

degree of direct clarity in her three largest pieces, the "Indeterminacy" series. Each consists of a hunk of the mineral pyrite resting on boulder-sized pieces of Vermont marble. Left alone outdoors, changes in weather cause the pyrite to leach sulfides onto the marble, staining it as if with blood.

Similarly, "Passion" employs a small vertical band of copper embedded in the gallery wall. Treated with chemicals, it stains the pristine surface. In "Contingency 1991," flax paper was soaked with silver and liver of sulfide resulting in a mottled surface that's more interesting than much abstract painting.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that, on the whole, nature is a better artist than we are. It's also understandable that, in reflecting on this, artists may suffer a kind of damage to their self-esteem. We seem to live in a moment when even the devout question the nature and purpose of the contemporary fine arts.

MOCA's Brent Zenger was curator of this thought-provoking installation.

■ Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave.; through Oct. 25, closed Mondays; (213) 626-6222.