

GIVING SHELTER

516 ARTS
516 CENTRAL AVENUE SW, ALBUQUERQUE

A fund-raising invitational conceived to aid the estimated forty-eight million orphaned children of Sub-Saharan Africa, *Giving Shelter* is the sort of show that invites commendation and criticism in equal measure. In the way of bringing attention to its sister-exhibition, *The Cradle Project*, the exhibition is an estimable accomplishment for 516 Arts. A recently launched venue whose dedicated staff has already proved effective in increasing arts attendance and awareness in downtown Albuquerque, it now witnesses its commitment to local outreach extend to encompass social agency on a global scale. Unfortunately, the institution's extended sphere of influence comes at the price of an overextended curatorial premise.

To some degree, this was to be expected. As a general rule, good fundraising tends to compromise good curating. Moreover, a diluted focus is often principal among the concessions accommodated. The reason for this is straightforward: the greater the number and diversity of artists included (no matter how irrelevant to a proposed thematic framework they may be), the greater the potential for sales and publicity to benefit an irreproachable cause. A key example: as early as the exhibition's opening day, numerous viewers could be seen congregating around Jane Mahon's sensitively rendered animal portrait, *Jazz*, which sets a chestnut colored horse against a richly modulated olive background, commercializes on the public's penchant for Western iconography, and wholly fails to engage the exhibition's purported theme. To the credit of curator Deborah Gavell, the exhibition's curator, in writing that "shelter and its many connotations [emphasis my own]" constitute the theme of an exhibition that "divides [with some crossover] into two categories, physical/literal structures and metaphysical/conceptual shelters," she proves aware of the need to preempt such criticisms.

Nonetheless, as laudable as complicating fixed notions of shelter may be, even Gavell's posited notion of "metaphysical/conceptual shelters" fails to retrieve works like *Jazz*, a large number of color field paintings, and gestural abstractions from obvious topical irrelevance. For instance, though the sensuous washes and gravity drips that define the suppressed figuration of Cindi Gaudette's *Fallen Woman* would be welcome in most any display of contemporary abstract painting, the composition does nothing to expand our conception of shelter. As counterfactual as it may be to judge an artwork on the basis of its effect on the artist who originates it, Gavell's statement that "for some, the practice of art making in itself is the refuge," is probably the closest one could come to a valid defence for such inclusions. Though visually appealing, paintings by Dorothy Fitz-Gerald, Margaret H. Fitzgerald, Robert Kelly, Lydia Madrid, and J. Mehauffey further evidence that *Giving Shelter's* inclusionary tactic runs counter to what should be the overarching concern of a thematic exhibition: deploying works to the utmost advantage of exploring a stated theme. Instead, these and other curatorial non-sequiturs render whole walls themeless.

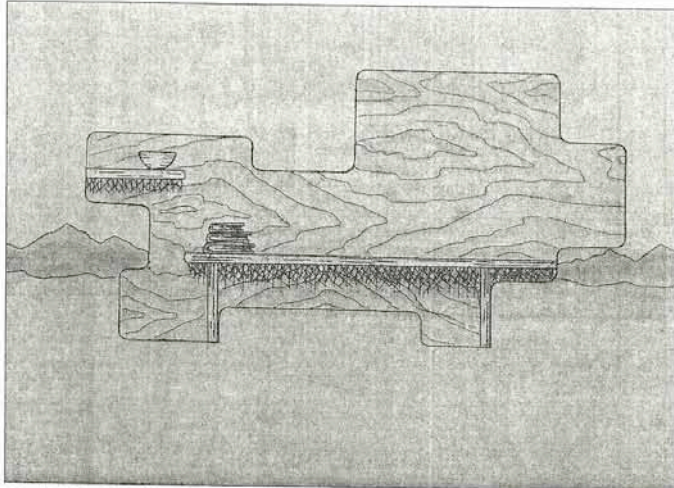
Beyond walls, on the topic of *Giving Shelter's* spatial context: where Gavell purports to subdivide shelter into "physical/literal" and "metaphysical/conceptual" categories,

she would have been wise to employ the venue's two-story structure to her advantage in making the point and focusing the viewer's experience. Instead, the staircase remains more interruption than intermission – working against rather than with a hydra-headed exhibition. In another respect, exhibition design proves exceedingly regimental: where numbered map pins determine a pre-fixed course through the show that reinforces the viewer's tendency to flit from work to the next too soon.

Despite such criticisms, it would be impossible not to discover a few standout works among the forty-nine contributed. Some, in fact, even gather valence from both the exhibition's nature as a fund-raising event for the orphaned children of Sub-Saharan Africa and its loose conceptualization of shelter. Jennifer Burkley-Vasher's *Careful What Shelter You Choose*—a seven-and-one-half-foot garland of lustrous pharmaceuticals – is a prime example. Evoking a hybrid between Damien Hirst's medicine cabinet sculptures and Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, it deftly merges the concept of our ineluctable mortality to a structure so slack, expressionistic, and irrepressibly true to the conditions of bodily gravity that Hirst's precious high-design sensibility would never countenance it. In the context of *Giving Shelter*, its equation of the false haven of modern medicine and ritual is clearly emphasized; and, here, one is also apt to read it as a lament over the pharmaceutical industry's corporate colonization of Africa and the continent's growing health crises raised now to a fever-pitch.

Perhaps, Bill Gilbert's *Untitled* is a perfect corollary to the whole of the exhibition. The 6" x 9" x 5" sculptural composition counterbalances two steel-grey ceramic panels in a manner that suggests a pared-down version of Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*—a form that proves little less anxious in miniature. Indeed, though it lacks the sheer heft of its antecedent, the work's precarious engagement with gravity is expressed with equal efficiency: a single thread connects the structure to a pull-ring that threatens to conjoin the human capacity to destroy to the already potent and inexorable force of physics. Begging its audience's goodwill, Gilbert's sculpture reminds us that impermanence, imbalance, and imperfection are ever-present components of material existence. Despite significant flaws, *Giving Shelter* is a show that accomplishes the very same.

ALEX ROSS



Andrea Zittel, *Rules of Rough*, 2004, etching and aquatint with chine colle, 13" x 17". Courtesy: Jacob Sarnuel