

ANITA COOKE

REVIEWS

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- "Three for the Legacy,"** by Terrington Calas. *The New Orleans Art Review*, May/June 2004
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- "Ecole de Cornell,"** by Terrington Calas. *The New Orleans Art Review*; January/February 1999
- "Anita Cooke: Human Roots,"** by Judith Bonner. *The New Orleans Art Review*; May/June 1996
- "Home Visions,"** by Judith Bonner. *New Orleans Art Review*; October, 1992.
- "Fragments of a Culture,"** by Jesse W. Nash. *The New Orleans Art Review*, March/April 1991.
- "New Mural Brightens a Too-Often Drab Landscape,"** by Mark Maher. *The Kalamazoo Gazette newspaper*, Fri. Nov. 24, 1989.



BUSY, BUSY

Anita Cooke's complicated collages are obsessive masterpieces



The giddy, energetic, obsessive quality of Anita Cooke's new works can be seen in this detail shot of 'Layered World #1.'

By Doug MacCash
Art critic

REVIEW

LAYERED WORLDS

By Anita Cooke

What: Unbelievably complicated abstract collages.

Where: Carol Robinson Gallery,
840 Napoleon Ave. (at Magazine Street) 895-6130.

When: Tues-Fri, 10 a.m. to 5:30; Sat, 10 a.m. to 5, through May 29.

Prices: \$950 to \$30,000.

May is a great month for art shows across the city, but if you can only make it to one, it should be Anita Cooke's "Layered Worlds" at Carol Robinson Gallery.

You may remember Cooke's ceramic plaques from past shows: grids of thumb-sized clay boxes stuffed with tiny clay spheres and other simple shapes. Their visual magnetism came from their honey-comb complexity. Your eyes became happily lost in the subtle variations from one tiny box to the next, to the next, to the next.

In "Layered Worlds," Cooke has changed media, but her love of complex grids remains. In fact, it has multiplied by the power of 10. Instead of a slab,

Cooke's new works begin with a layer of heavy watercolor paper held to the wall with a set of crude iron bolts. To this wavy substrata, she applies postage stamp-sized pieces of paper cut from books, magazines and watercolor pads, plus tiny hand drawings and photographs — zillions of them. She piles scores of these paper rectangles atop one another to create a topography of hundreds of ragged miniature pyramids.

She holds the paper pyramids down with thousands upon thousands of heavy-duty staples, which take on a frantic life of their own, like ants on a picnic blanket. Finally, to amplify the visual buzz even more, she sprinkles the surface with tiny objects such as beads, alphabet blocks, colored string and other bottom-of-the-

drawer what-nots.

The results are thick, rainbow-hued, rough-and-tumble tapestries so dizzily busy that they make her past ceramic works look as calm as Feng Shui. The most stunning of her stunning new pieces is "A World Portrait . . . Knotty Interconnected World," a 6-by-12 foot triptych exploding with square bits of road map, suspended on tiny lengths of speaker wire.

The labor that went into "A World Portrait" must have been staggering and the result is magnificent, though costly — \$30,000. The New Orleans Museum of Art or the Ogden Museum of Southern Art should scrape together the money to add this breakout Information-Age masterpiece to their permanent collections.

Anita Cooke creates a stunner and then takes a breather

By Doug MacCash

Art critic

Anita Cooke's "Layered Worlds" exhibit at Carol Robinson Gallery in May was New Orleans' best contemporary art show of 2004.

Cooke, 50, created enormous, ultra-complicated collages of cut-up maps, foreign money and torn drawings, that perfectly reflect the buzzing confusion of the cell-phone-Internet-satellite-direction-finder-laptop-interactive-misinformation age.

The stunning show, plus the gushing

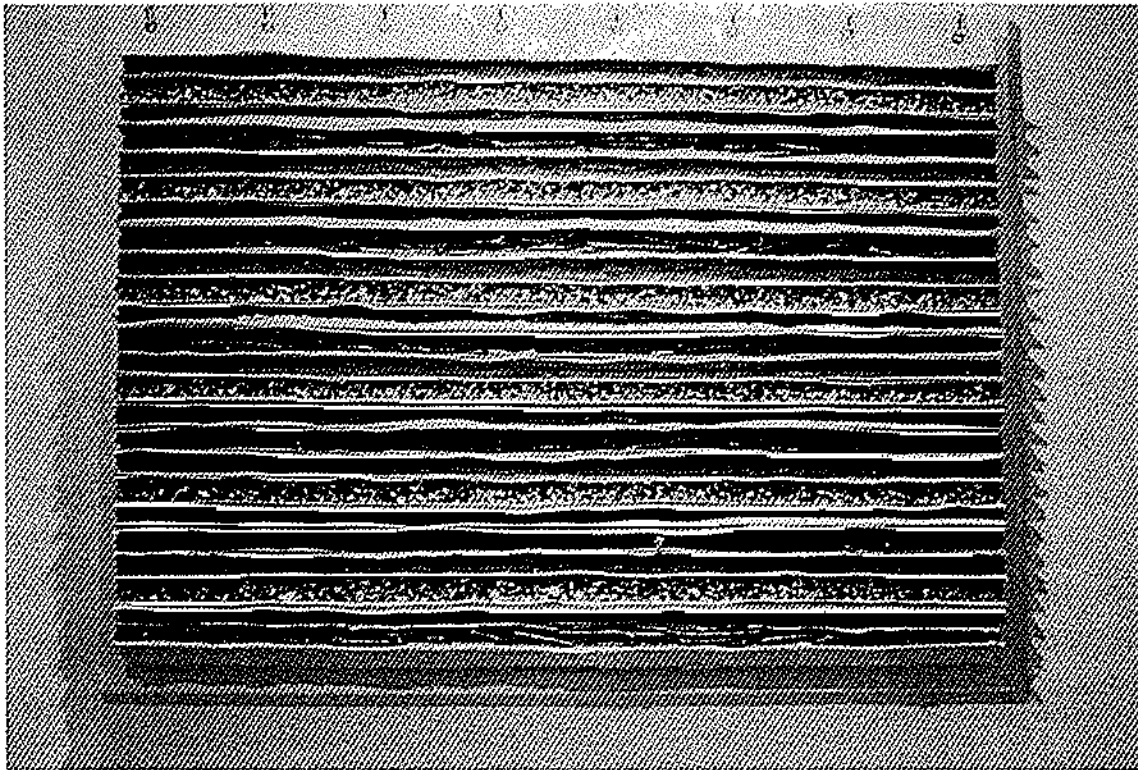
review she received in these pages, would have built an unquenchable fire of self-importance and ambition in the breasts of most artists.

Not Cooke. She hasn't scheduled a show in 2005 or 2006, owing to the time it takes to create her maniacal collages. Plus: She has a house that needs renovation. She might start giving ceramic instructions again. She's finally finishing up that nine-place tableware set for her step-daughter. And she has a 10-year-old to watch grow.

In other words, Cooke's got a life going on and the art world will just have to wait. What a concept.



Anita Cooke's exhibit at the Carol Robinson Gallery in May was the best contemporary art show of 2004. Her collection of complicated collages captured the overwhelming complexity of the digital age.



Anita Cooke: *Earth Layers*, 2004. Paper, rocks, sand, sticks, pine needles.

Three for the Legacy

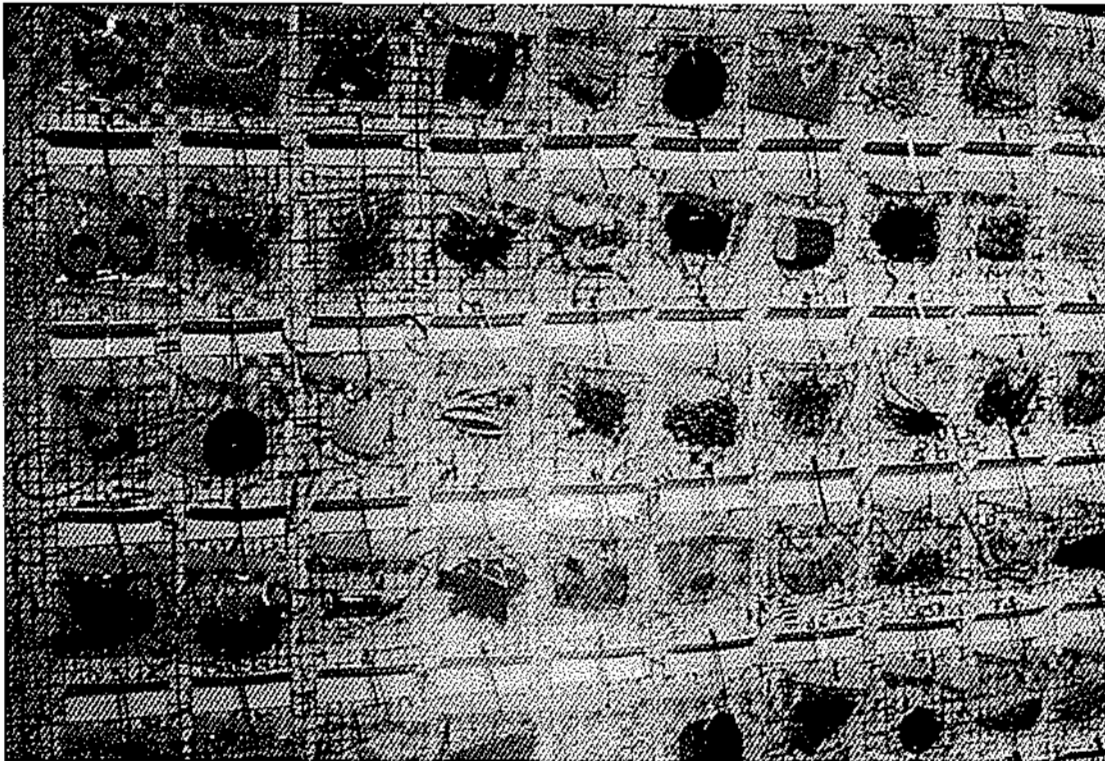
BY TERRINGTON CALAS

ANITA COOKE
Recent Works
Carol Robinson Gallery
MIKE FEDOR
Paintings and Collages
Barrister's Gallery
SYBILLE PERETTI
New Works
Sylvia Schmidt Gallery
New Orleans, LA

ANITA COOKE'S WORK is most intriguing when it is most austere. Two pieces, *Earth Layers* and *Grid #1*, fit the bill. We see old things, detritus, patinaed metal, tiny torn-edged pictures, paper that has been punished and umbered and molded. These are dense collages with the look of gathered and assembled earth or, metaphorically, indices of our earth-bound experience. And they are, to be sure, Cooke's most balanced work to date — conspicu-

ously structured, but without exacting rigor; richly tactile but not sensuous; longing, but not nostalgic. Most important, the heavy ambitiousness of her theme is countered by subtlety, a too rare commodity today.

These two works represent the core intelligence of an exhibition that, ironically, appears to battle the intelligence of order, appears to enlist in an ideology of grab-bag automatism. (And that exhibition, recently at Carol Robinson, situates Cooke where she has belonged for some time: in the top tier of New Orleans artists.) I mention austerity and automatism, two constants we remember from her work over the past several years. She was known for unique, grid-faced ceramic plaques, truly splendid things that recalled Joseph Cornell's stark and mystical white grids. More important, her plaques sparred with the notion of perfection, all the while acknowledging that fired clay, unavoidably, will impose the wont of nature. It will impose irregular form. Simply put, in those sculptures, the implied perfection of the grid gave way to a



Anita Cooke: *Collection: Saving Grace*, 2004. M/M, pebbles hung by pins.

kind of genuflection before nature's sway.

The other key aspect of Cooke's earlier work, as I say, had to do with automatism or, at least, the suggestion of it. Her grids amounted to a line-up of tiny cubicles that she filled with simple, arbitrarily selected forms. We were struck by the easy aleatory character of those selections. They seemed like happy accidents, constantly approaching — but stopping just short of — symmetry. Of course, this "automatic" posture conjured up a fundamental technique from the Surrealist tradition.

And it went beyond that. Those "happy accidents," predictably, also rendered an intangible, enigmatic quality. Consider Cooke's ritual-like presentation — familiar shapes, displaced and isolated within a baffling, doorless maze. And consider, too, the sculptures' mesmerizing, pale neutrality. Ultimately, they had the sense of a mystical architecture.

This is actually associated with two legacies: obviously, Cornell's late surrealist obsession with the poetry of abridged order; and, another, the metaphysical, almost religious, dimension that obtained in early formalist

abstract art. This latter was clearly evident in the grid plaques. The ghost of Constructivism hung uneasily about them. I say "uneasily" because Cooke's geometric essays were not emphatically geometric. The mitigating human touch was patent. Constructivist art had been, in part, about hallowed universals, universals as doctrinaire paradigms of earthly perfection. The perfect square, the perfect society. Cooke, in variance, manipulated the universal into the subjective. Her geometry became "organicized." In those pieces, we foresaw an art of warmth and lyricism.

In "Layered Worlds," the new suite of collages, she has realized it. The Cornell legacy now dominates. And his connection matters more now than before. What endures in Cornell's art is not his formalism, not his resolute structuring; it is his reverence for "the object," the way his deliberation transforms the object into a sacred marker. And that marker is part of an abiding reverie — a poetic one, a sublime one, an exotic one and, at times, a sentimental one.

Cooke, it would seem, has reveries, too. How



Sybille Peretti: *The Neckface*. Installation, Sylvia Schmidt Gallery.

else to explain her obsessive gathering of "things." It is not merely the compulsion to collect or the compulsion to arrange, though we can scarcely escape them. One work, *Paper Quilt*, is a free-hanging collage of scores of paper fragments, in endless colors and patterns, appended with staples. Another, *Collection: Saving Grace*, features tiny transparent packets containing everything from rubberbands to lovely stones, from useful things to castoffs — all neatly pinned to each other in near-perfect rows.

One quickly thinks of Cornell's orderly studio and its labeled containers of whatnots and junk. But we must consider that he transferred his treasures, a few at a time, into curio boxes, reassigned their context, poetized them. Sentimentalized them. Cooke's ordering is essentially different. It has the feel of archaeological study; a certain detachment is implied. The austerity of pigeonholing. And the objects seem to be valued scientifically, for their meaning, perhaps for their cultural import. Nevertheless, all of this is probably symbolic. This is art-making. And it looks it. The continual gridding and stacking is both art and study. Cooke offers insistent regularity,

but her works are not themselves insistent. There is a tenderness beneath the structure — a sort of meditation on the stuff of the world. It is as if Cooke were contemplating in wonderment, actually questioning the significance of it all.

TWO OTHER EXHIBITIONS concurrent with Anita Cooke's, and effectively distinct from it, nonetheless shared in the Surrealist legacy. Sybille Peretti and Mike Fedor are aligned principally by their creation of new spiritual spheres. In both instances, we have the sense of looking into a private world where things and events are far from logical, where the Surrealist penchant for the irrational is fully embraced.

Peretti, at least initially, seems very close to the ethos. Her "First Lessons in Beekeeping" (recently at Sylvia Schmidt) could justly be described as a salute to implausible juxtaposition. She presents mixed-media paintings that establish an ongoing pictorial relationship between young children and bees. What sounds cartoonish and trivial is, in fact, affecting. Peretti manages the

Anita Cooke's Grids

BY MARIAN S. MCLELLAN

ANITA COOKE
New Works
Carol Robinson Gallery
New Orleans, La.

POTTERS HAVE BEEN testing the limits of clay ever since George Ohr squished into being one of his thin lipped *Vagina Pots*. This Mad Potter of Biloxi died back in 1918, but it could be that his spirit inspired California to issue its own line of avant-garde ceramists. So many in fact that I will name only two. The macho potter Peter Voukos garnered acclaim with Amazonian plates glazed like expressionistic canvas and fractured like quaking earth. Ceramics was no longer synonymous with fragile houseware. But something was missing: a woman's touch. However, the new order of clay would require a special hand. Enter Viola Frey, dressed for the occasion in dusty cowboy boots, over-sized flannel shirt and ankle-length denim skirt. And wouldn't you know, this lady wasn't about to pull any computes from her oven. No, in sort of a Hansel and Gretel rewrite, Viola's kiln-fired brew emerged larger-than-life. Clay literally stood on its own two feet.

Now that the dust of spirited innovation has settled, earth dwellers are focusing on introspective ventures, oftentimes favoring wall over floor to display their wares. Consider Anita Cooke's monochromatic stoneware at Carol Robinson Gallery. Collectively titled *Gridworks*, the two-room exhibit of flush-mounted, hand-built trays each contain backdrops of raised grids with compartments of open and closed geometric unitage that includes marbles, circles, and rods. Vying for top billing with the orderly grid is Cooke's impressive virtuosity with the clay medium. Particularly the pieces which underplay the grid to result in an unusual interpretation of mass via expressive manipulation of her favored slab format.

Representative of Cooke's trademark of embedded objects on a vertical plane, *In the Center of the Grid* is part of a series in the gallery of off-white, square grids with centrally imposed boxes that house methodically arranged shelves of tiny bits of glazed clay. The sandy gridwork is sporadically covered with circles, spheres, and cubes in

relation to the artist's statement about the measured coupling of chaos and order. Here it is nearly overstated, though the sieve-like grid's contents do evoke a seaside bounty of stonewashed treasure.

This notion gains fervor in the similarly orchestrated *Grid on Grid #3* due to the delicate addition of color in the central square. Then one thinks of Mondrian's reductive tempo of color and more specifically to his assertion of the balance of unequal opposites to achieve a pure reality. It is apropos that the Dutch artist's impetus was Holland's seashore, which he sought to convey in a sort of block plan style.

Cooke's most obvious deviation from the grid is the large, sand-colored *Wave Rhythms*, measuring 85" H x 32" W x 5" D. The vertical stacking of hefty, wave-shaped units has appealing beachside texture going for it: rough with jewels meandering about, but the piece is so conclusive as befits an endgame of corporate lodging.

Something beyond the immediate occurs in two other groupings under the lead titles of *Stacks* and *Layers*. In these, Cooke investigates a personal reliquary reminiscent of Clyde Connell's invocation. More in the ochre rectangles of *Layers* than in the glazed white *Stacks*, though both engage tactile sensibility. *Stacks #1* presents an unusual variation of the slab, seen here as pastry thin strips stacked like paper jutting from a shelf.

Which brings us to the subdued suite of five, vertically arranged *Layers* and to Cooke's stronger works conjuring up shallow drawers pulled perhaps from an oceanid's bureau, contents intact, so orderly disordered. *Layers #2* holds strands of beads, rods, and string, all wedded by gritty gobs of mortar.

Ours is a symmetrically balanced world. Yet within this comfort zone of recognition exists a network of asymmetry. But as depicted in Cooke's *Gridworks*, there is balance nonetheless. Could it be that we humans unwittingly collect anonymous odds and ends in a subconscious effort to mirror, on a microcosmic scale, the world at large. And that in so doing we complete the other side of life's imaginary axis. □



GAMBIT
WEEKLY

April '89

Marks, Grids and Mazes

WHAT: *Gridworks* — ceramics by Anita Cooke
WHERE: Carol Robinson Gallery, 840 Napoleon Ave., 895-6130
WHEN: Through April
WHAT: Paintings by Paul Tarver
WHERE: Cole Pratt Gallery, 3800 Magazine St., 891-6789
WHEN: Through April

A place for everything and everything in its place." So goes the age-old battle cry, the clarion call for order, organization and the systematic arranging and re-arranging of all that we see around us. Indeed, the need to collect, accumulate and arrange must surely rank high among mankind's most primal passions, right up there with gluttony, avarice, debauchery, tax evasion and sports betting. And when it comes to putting things in their place, nothing does it like a grid.

Think about it — when you want to organize things, what do you do? You put stuff in boxes, of course. But then what do you do with the boxes? Ah! Stack them vertically or in horizontal rows on shelves — and there you have it: an orderly grid-like arrangement. That is how it has always been, and that is how it remains today. Every house or building is a box, and every city is an elaborate grid of streets. Very tidy and neat. So the grid is the traditional tool for arranging objects in the chaotic spaces of this world, and Anita

Cooke's ceramics show *Gridworks*, at Carol Robinson, is a philosophical rumination on that very phenomenon. Abstract, yet interspersed with realistic details, Cooke's *Gridworks* are the most elaborate and finely wrought of her longstanding stoneware grid sculptures to date.

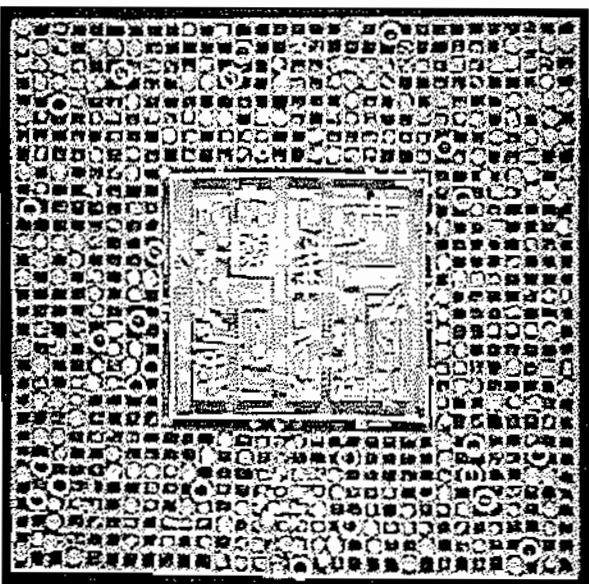
Although grids have emerged as the almost universally human system of organization, it is noteworthy that grids evoke uniquely subjective responses in each of us. Personally, I always feel a mixture of claustrophobia and intrigue when I am confronted by a grid, and Cooke, in a brief prose poem used in lieu of an artist statement, suggests that such mixed feelings may come with the territory. Even so, such impressions no doubt will vary with the individual on a personal, case-by-case basis.

For instance, #7 *Stacks* #2 is distinctly cluttered, a maze of cubbyholes containing a variety of little clay forms, some round as

D. ERIC BOOKHARDT

inside art

ball bearings, others flat as stacked rent receipts. It is a scene that sits memories of my grandfather's old rollout desk with its maze of cubbyholes overflowing with old papers, shotgun shells, seed samples, pocket knives, magnifiers, barometers and all the odd junk one might expect of a retired farmer/hardware store owner. But this is merely how #7 *Stacks* #2 looks to me, a set of associations that contrasts sharply with



ANITA COOKE'S "IN THE CENTER OF THE GRID" TYPIFIES THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCES AT PLAY IN GRIDWORKS.

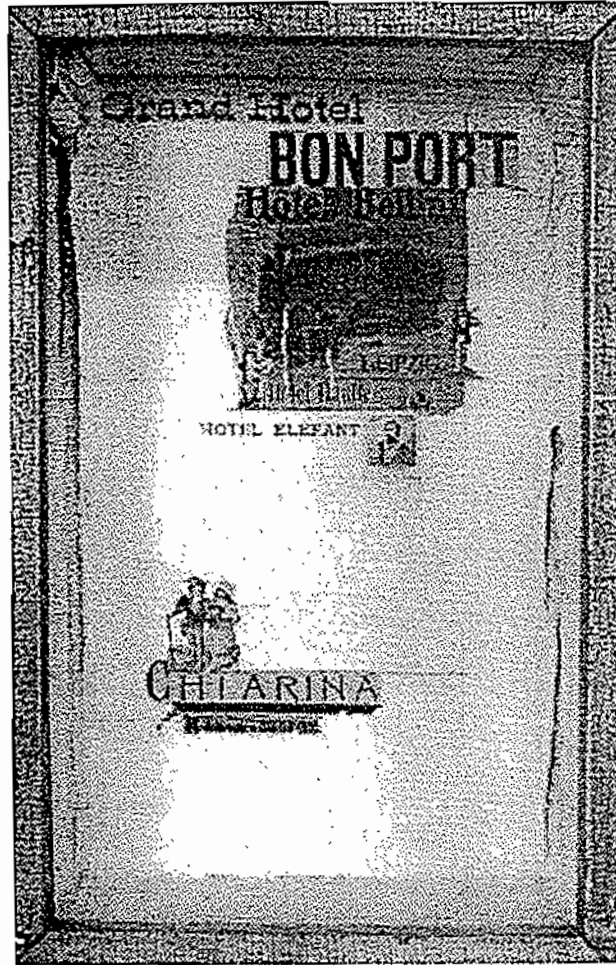
#18 *Layers* #4, a totem-like arrangement of crusty ceramic balls and other odd bits overflowing a rustic honeycomb of rectangular or square recesses. Although very busy, the space and scale of the piece feel almost airy in contrast to some of the others, its openness standing in counterpoint to all those enclosures within enclosures.

Similar dynamics appear with a vengeance in #13 *Deep Blue*. A square baroque grid suggestive of a Victorian cast-iron ventilator (or a medieval air conditioning duct), *Blue* comprises rectangular clusters of cubicles in airy arrangements, a formal contrapunto that is somehow gossamer yet forbidding. The rectangular clusters are stacked like modules in a swastika-maze riddled with cubicles, resulting in a devout stoneware mind game, a square labyrinth of cul-de-sacs (or, perhaps, a

cross section of Machiavelli's brain). And so it goes: like cells and domiciles of all sorts, grids may shelter or imprison, contain or constrain; it all depends on what is happening — and to whom. Very psychological stuff.

If Cooke's *Gridworks* sometimes evokes abstractions of natural labyrinths, the caves and grottos that were mankind's first shelters and storage sites, Paul Tarver's paintings at Cole Pratt hark to some equally primal and earthly roots in the form of the mossy megaliths and moldy monoliths of old Ireland. Sporting titles like *Wicklow*, *Clunie* or *Fife*, these are largely paintings in which oil pigments appear shattered on in dense impressionistic encrustations.

Like the weathered old stones themselves, they can be hard to read; only vague traces of cryptic runes appear amid the undulating surface turmoil. Crescents, grids, circles and slabs seem to float in the gauzy murk, yet, unlike Tarver's darkly foreboding encrustations of the past, these seem evanescent, transitory if not transitional. The colors and forms are oddly impressionistic, with tropical overtones that hark to the daquiri parlors of the ancient Druids. And, like the mottled runes inscribed on the monoliths, their meanings appear veiled by a host of unnamed diffusions, and we are left to ponder a water-marked message in a bottle washed ashore from an antique and unknown time, half-spoken syllables uttered in some strangely familiar yet long forgotten tongue. ☞



Joseph Cornell: *Untitled (Romantic Hotel, "Chiarina")*, 1954. Assemblage. Courtesy NOMA.

Ecole de Cornell

BY TERRINGTON CALAS

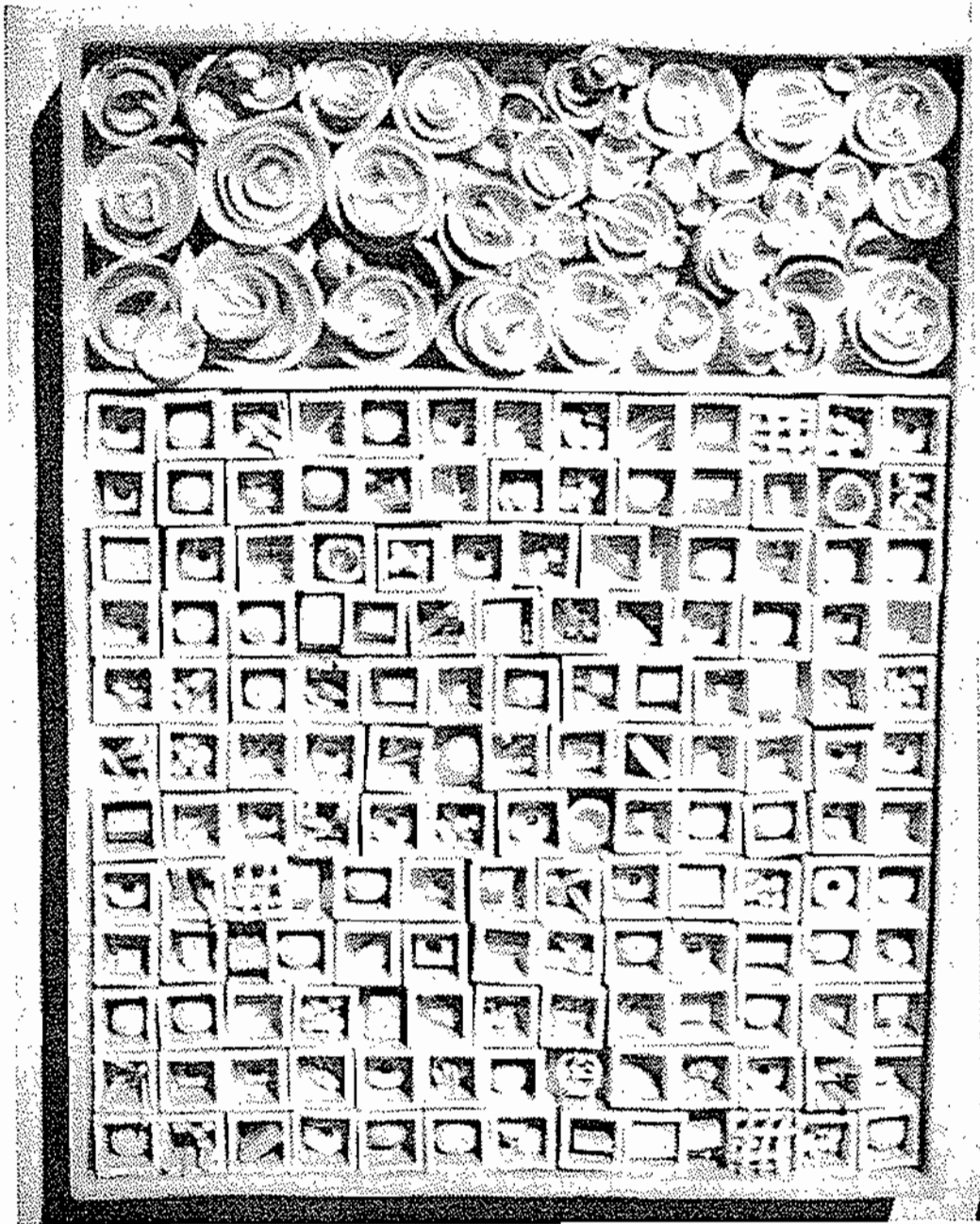
THE GHOST OF CORNELL
The Contemporary Arts Center
New Orleans, LA

Memories are hunting horns whose sound dies on the wind.
— Guillaume Apollinaire

LAST MONTH'S *Ghost of Cornell* was, above all, a curatorial coup. It was an exhibition made to order for the Contemporary Arts Center and for New Orleans. A natural. In fact, nothing at the CAC since Robert Tannen's retrospective has seemed so much our own. The show looked and felt like the core of the city: a bit unhinged, haunted by the past, murky, musty, irresistible.

The interesting fact is that this look and feel have been associated here with a high modernist artist far removed from New Orleans and from the South. The *Ghost of Cornell* posits the collage/constructions of Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) as a significant inspiration for Louisiana artists. And it intimates even more — that this region, especially New Orleans itself, is more intensely Cornelian than any other place in America and, further, that our response to Cornell's weighty legacy is somehow of singular importance.

Cornell was a solitary dreamer who, in his art, created a personal universe much richer and more fantastic than the one around him. (His actual environment, for most of his life, was a frame house on the aptly named Utopia Parkway in Flushing, Queens, New York.) That created universe is now legendary. It consists of small boxes — memory stage-sets where objets trouvés,



Anita Cooke: *From the Wayward Collection*, 1996. Porcelain.

minutiae and clippings are shrewdly assembled in a complete memoir replete with exotic settings and hushed by a gorgeous serenity. Despite their lyrical beauty and frequently distinct references, the boxes convey a fragmented and incongruous history that chiefly made sense to Cornell alone. And similarly, it is true that the incongruities of New Orleans — the old amidst the new, the old revered as priceless enigma — often make sense only to us.

New Orleans is an old city that seems even older. It is a city long on memory. CAC curator Doug MacCash mentions "the overall sense of dream-like nostalgia." One might add a pervasive mournful quality, a somber and ineffable longing — discerned most notably in the historic

districts and in the black-green shadows of Audubon Park, City Park, everywhere our ancient oaks preside. This air of longing is possibly the truest link to Cornell and to why local artists find an uncommon affinity with him. His assemblages have the same quality. Through his sustained contriving of a past, he was, in effect, conjuring a magical, Baudelairean land, a land worthy of prized keepsake boxes. For him, that land was usually Europe; it signified high culture. But, of course, it was the "idea of Europe" that enthralled him; he never actually saw it. In box after box, he would manipulate cut-out art reproductions, hotel letterheads, images of illustrious European dancers, bits of French and Italian detail. There is a series of assemblages devoted entirely to the



Clarence John Laughlin: *Bird of the Death Dream, Bird of Ultimate Whiteness*, 1953. Gelatin silver print.

are. But even at this phase in his career, he was able to persuade us of his sincerity. From within the Cornellian mode, his own posture gingerly bares itself. In certain pieces we can see the origins of his recent preoccupation — shuttering evocations of dire social reality.

Perhaps the most formal work in the show, and certainly among the most beautiful, is Anita Cooke's *From the Wayward Collection*. It is a shallow porcelain wall piece that transforms the customary Cornell box into a kind of hanging tray. It immediately recalls certain of Cornell's most rigorous assemblages — those white boxes crammed with with white cubes and spheres. Cooke's piece is bifurcated, the lower section occupied by various geometric forms within twelve rows of small frame-like enclosures. The top section is filled with forms that are both organic and not; they look like stacks of tiny bowls — the formal sphere of Constructivism recast in the most refined clay and made plentiful. But they also vaguely suggest flowers, and this is the requisite mitigation of so much angularized porcelain. In this piece, Cooke tackles both Cornell's legacy and that of high formalism. And she demonstrates the abiding poetic viability of them both.

A splendid, unforgettable pleasure in the *Ghost of Cornell* was the presence of works by the late Clarence John Laughlin. He and Cornell were fellow votaries of the Surrealist aesthetic — Laughlin more so, Cornell often less so. Laughlin was amaster collagist, as an extraordinary heraldic image in the show confirmed. But one of his more direct prints was also on display. *Bird of the Death Dream, Bird of Ultimate Whiteness*, 1953, haunted the exhibition. It hung near the entrance, not far from two Cornell originals. Above all, it reawakened the idea that surrealist juxtaposition is very likely the most potent maneuver in modernist art. This white bird in a white box with white flowers is all about pure beauty and sadness — and their conflation, an notion cited above in the work of Gaudet and Gilbert. It is also, however, a testament to the strength of aesthetic intelligence. In this work, as in many of his photographs, Laughlin's surrealism proves its singularity. He was able to structure space flawlessly, light it judiciously, and approximate the effects of surrealist automatism. And he did this while somehow grasping our emotions. □

THE NEW ORLEANS ART REVIEW
MAY/JUNE 1996.

Anita Cooke: Human Roots

BY JUDITH H. BONNER

ANITA COOKE
Ceramic Sculptures
Carol Robinson Gallery
New Orleans, La.

WHO ARE WE? Where do we come from? Where are we going? In truly appreciating creative accomplishment, it is essential to have an understanding of these elementary questions, in particular the first two. This is certainly true in making an evaluation of ceramic works by Anita Cooke on exhibition at Carol Robinson Gallery.

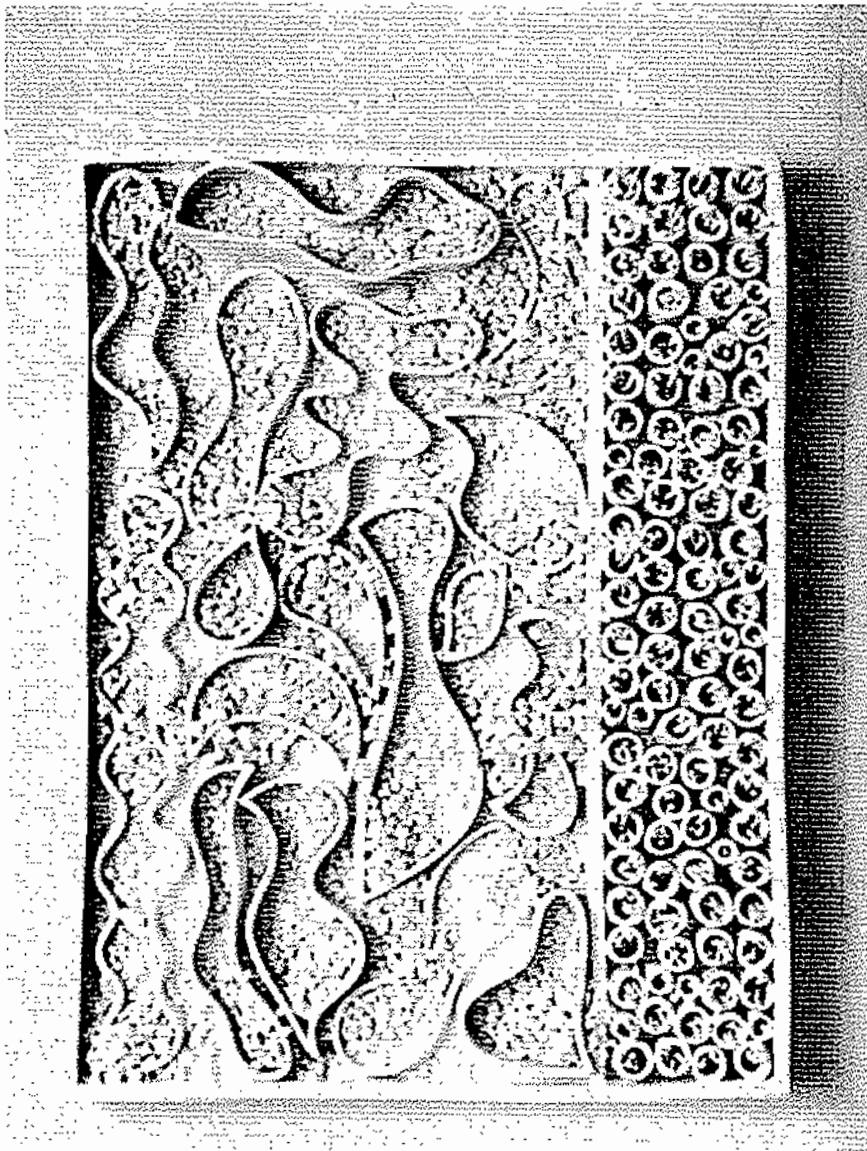
There has been a long tradition of pottery making in New Orleans, beginning with Biloxi, Mississippi potters Joseph Meyer and George Ohr at the World's Industrial Cotton and Centennial Exposition in New Orleans in 1884-1885. Quickly upon the heels of the Exposition, the New Orleans Art Pottery was established by Meyer and Ohr, together with considerable assistance from Ellsworth and William Woodward, who had first come to work at the Fair, and then returned to help establish the art program at the Harriet Sophie Newcomb Memorial College for Women. The pottery endeavor quickly moved to the Newcomb Art School, and the rest is history. The early program at Newcomb was based upon functional pottery thrown by male potters and decorated by women. Decorative motifs featured indigenous themes from nature and the landscape. For 45 years the ceramic program, which truly celebrated the city's heritage, held an esteemed position at Newcomb. With changing times, the sculpture program began to make inroads, first with Angela Gregory,

then with Jules Struppeck whose tenure at the College was equally as long as that of the Pottery.

There has also been a long tradition of experimentation at Newcomb, including the first experimentations for suitable clays, glazes, and forms. Later experiments focused on handbuilding, beginning in the 1930s with innovative women like Juanita Gonzalez, Evelyn Witherspoon, and—leading into the early 1950s—with Katherine Choy's large non-traditional sculptural ceramic pieces. By this point, function was no longer an essential intention for the pottery, nor was there any established direction for form or decoration. Where it was once considered not quite proper for young women to throw pots, it was now considered quite acceptable. Self-expression had been given priority, and for the next forty years the freedom of creative articulation would never again be subjugated to dictated routines.

It is from this tradition that Cooke, a Newcomb graduate, has emerged. Like Gonzalez, Witherspoon, and Choy, Cooke's works are hand constructed, non-traditional, and sculptural. She shares with her predecessors an obvious concern for meticulous craftsmanship. While Gonzalez created large works like fountains and mantelpieces, Cooke's ceramics are strictly sculptural wall pieces. Each of these manifest archeological overtones. She has truly mastered her technique as well as excellent principles of craftsmanship. Where Gregory moved from pottery into sculpture, Cooke has merged ceramics with sculpture.

Her *Wayward Collection* series features meticulously finished glossy white porcelain shallow boxes divided into squares, rectangles, circles, or D-rings. The various



Anita Cooke: *Wayward Collection # 2*, 1995.

subdivided niches or "pigeonholes" of these crate-like receptacles contain a variety of sculpted circles, marbles, washers, corkscrews, slivers, rods, beads, etc. The entire effect is that of extraordinarily orderly industrial storage bins.

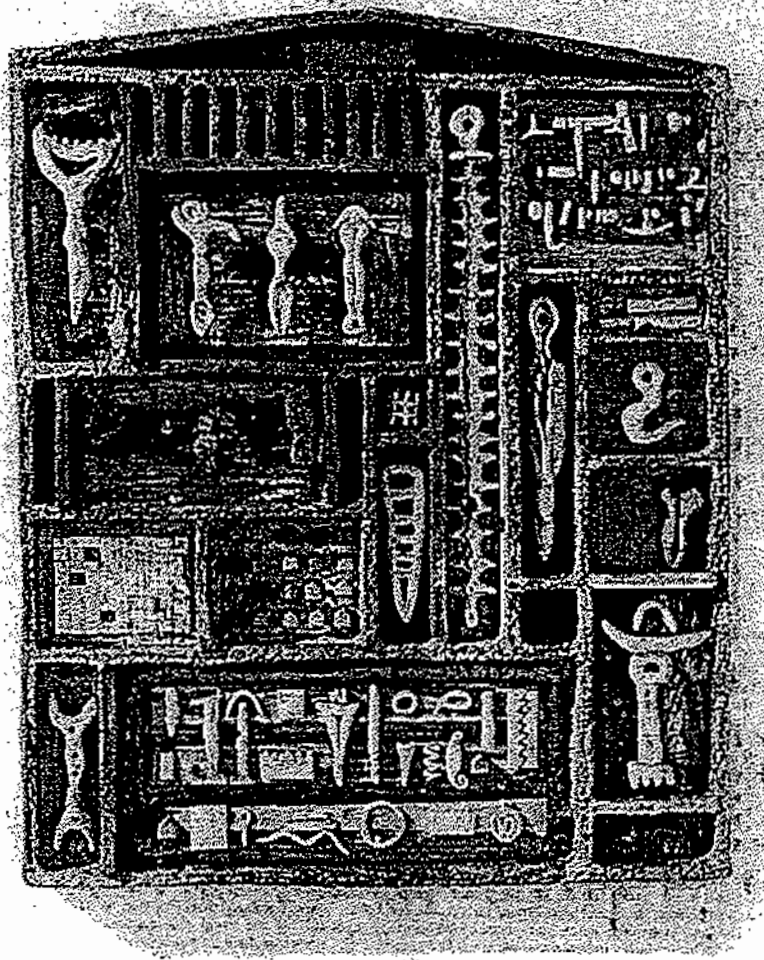
Cooke's other arrangements are more colorful, each having a grayish brown rectangular body with shimmering blue, rose, green, and gold opalescent glazes. *Aerial View* is comprised of five elongated side-by-side divisions. The overall appearance is as though looking at an industrial park from a bird's eye-view. There are strips and rows of circles, rectangles, checkerboard squares, and colored marbles—all these interspersed with concentric circles that appear like prehistoric dwellings surrounded by organized debris.

A work titled *An Underlying Order with*

Exception underscores Cooke's awareness of this effect, which seems to govern her entire show. This work is arranged like a grid having nine horizontal rows by twelve vertical rows. Within the square sections are an endless variety of circles, squares, cones, triangles, corkscrews, bolts, and other objects. All are neatly pigeonholed, although they appear somewhat casually placed within their individual storage squares. These works recall numerous contemporary advertisements for closets and storage bins, and underscore the present mania in this country for the organization of clutter that encompasses our daily lives.

While maintaining the same general rule of construction in Cooke's other pieces, *A Group of Women Revealing Their Inner Jewels* transfers mechanization to human beings. Row-after-row of vertically arranged

THE NEW
ORLEANS ART
REVIEW
OCT. 1992



Home Visions

BY JUDITH H. BONNER

“‘HOME VISIONS’ AND other works in clay” understates Anita Cooke’s accomplishment in her latest work at the Carol Robinson Gallery. The term “home” applies not only to the contemporary hearth and home, but to urban architecture and early archaeological structures, as well as to the human body, which can, perhaps, be considered as an “organic house.”

Several ceramic sculptures, e.g. *House with Heart*, serve as visual puns, drawing parallels between houses and human bodies. The overall shape of the structure recalls a body, with various chambers bearing a direct correlation to human anatomy. Cooke’s series on *Inner Spaces* retains an overall resemblance to a human body, while interior motifs are more playful. Small circles, squares, rectangles, rods, tic-tac-toe grids, and other colorful ceramic pieces are arranged within interior compartments reminiscent of nursery-school storage boxes for game-pieces.

Other ceramic constructions suggest jig-saw puzzle constructions or gameboards. Still others recall printer’s boxes with impressions of letters and small collectible objects arranged within the cubicles. In one such printer’s box, *Collection #2*, shapes suggestive of architect’s drafting tools are unified in their earth tones. Some works suggest churches or

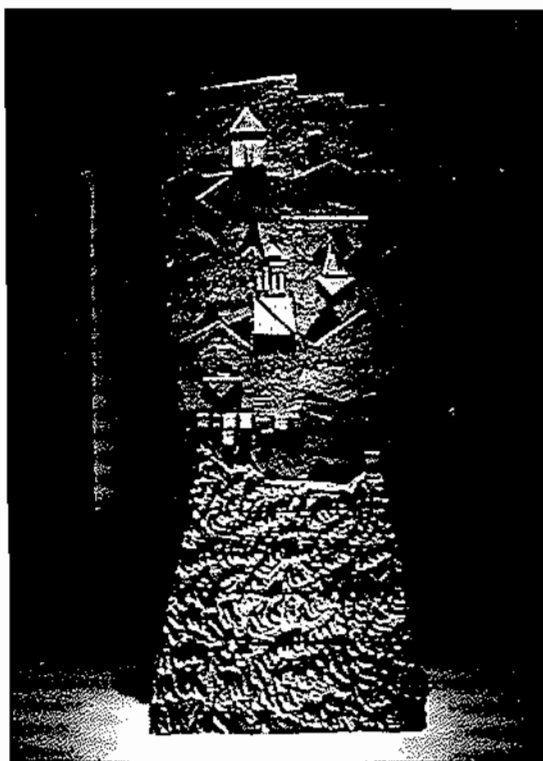
temples or convey religious connotations; some make references to archaic figurines or artifacts from earlier cultures.

Two constructed aerials views, *View from Above* and *Pathways*, feature squares, triangles, circles, and other geometric shapes bearing a direct resemblance to architectural structures within the grid-like arrangement of plats, plans and city maps. Both wall sculptures have multiple parts arranged in an overall vertical structure—*Pathways* is formed by ten juxtaposed horizontal strips, while *View from Above* consists of seven horizontal rows of three puzzle-like or block-like shapes. For interest and variety, both have skillfully sculpted voids or recessed areas reminiscent of swimming pools or architectural substructures.

A whimsical series of pets with matching chairs allows the viewer a more intimate view of home life, a view that, possibly is most appreciated by pet owners who daily observe the antics of animals climbing upon household furnishings.

Even without titles, themes, or subcurrent of meaning, Cooke presents a substantial body of handsomely crafted works that are immediately arresting, aesthetically pleasing, and deserving of protracted study or observation.

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Anita Cooke: Site-Fragment/Home.

Fragments of a Culture

BY JESSE W. NASH

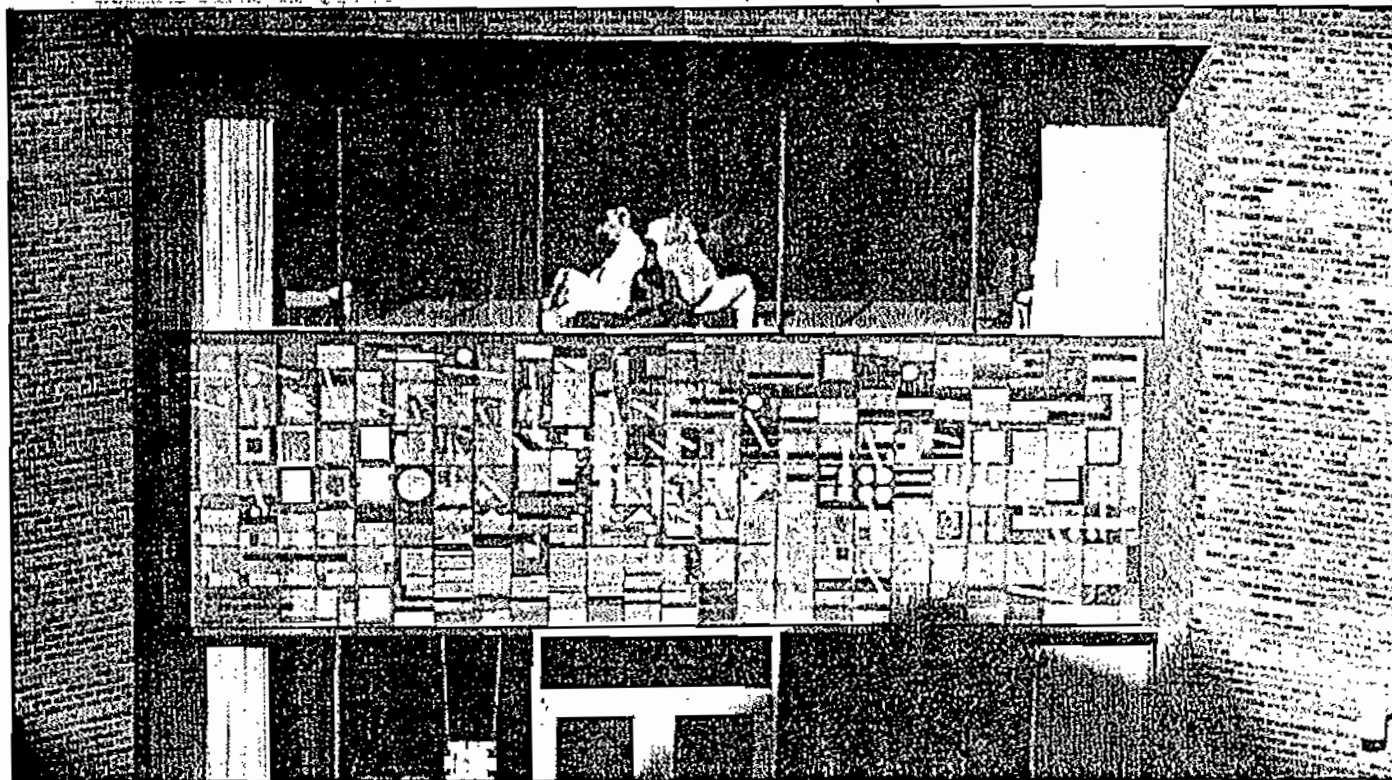
ANITA COOKE'S RECENT exhibition at the Carol Robinson Gallery on Magazine is testimony to the monumental nature of our culture, and it points to the fact that it is in disarray. The culture is in fragments, one is lead to believe, and the only way to do art is to do it in sometimes extravagant, sometimes pretentious, sometimes elegant, sometimes playful, but always awe-inspiring fragments. Her sculptures, vases, monuments, platters, and other delights remind one of the ruins of an alien civilization, as if one had just stepped into Andre Norton's *Witch World* or Tolkien's Middle Earth. But we are really watching ourselves disintegrate, not *Witch World*. In her terracotta monuments, such as *Rockbottom* or *Site Fragment: Home*, we see ourselves becoming alienated from ourselves. She doesn't have to posit another world to project our alienation. She simply takes pieces of our own and puts them back together again, askew, tumbling, faltering, but also at the same time, fragments of an empire aspiring to monumental status. One walks away from Cooke's constructions wondering how Italians or Greeks feel about living around so many ruins that attest to past greatness and contemporary decline. Or how New Yorkers might feel once they realize that no one is any longer in control of the city and its inhabitants.

But empires die with artistic flourishes. Monarchical Europe is dying at the same time it practices baroque, and baroque is simply an empire's last dying gasp at greatness lost. Empires never know they are dying. They have traditionally controlled the art of the empire, and the only way we ever get

any idea that a cultural order is in trouble is to look at the art, to see Goya's dismay painted on a canvas or to hear Beethoven's ambivalence in his triumphalism, to hear the fear eddying beneath the surface in the Fifth Symphony, to note Hegel's eagerness at Napoleon's approach. Empires die in confusion because art all too often doesn't understand what it feels, what it practices almost unconsciously. Mozart's work is a good example. It is so exuberant that we think we are in the midst of a civilization at its comfortable zenith instead of a civilization in decline and perhaps already in well-entrenched decadence—Mozart isn't simply exuberant; he is suffering from the hysteria of his times.

Cooke's works tell us about the state of our empire at a conscious level, and her achievement is rather remarkable given the state of the arts at this time. She hasn't retreated to formalism, portraits, cute landscapes, reaganesque art, if you will. She has put her finger on the pulse of the empire and felt the irregular beat. She has piled the bricks of the empire together and called that art. That is all any artist does. She has even allowed herself flights of whimsy in *Ivory Playhouse*. But even here, whimsy touches our culture at its most profound and fragmented levels. Can one do great art in a culture that makes a bestseller of the presidential pooch Millie? Can such a culture any longer make a contribution to the story of humanity? Only if that story is one of entropy. Cooke has done the only think an artist can do: produce fragments of fragments.

ENTERTAINMENT



GAZETTE PHOTOS / ROBERT MAXWELL

Surrounded by a sea of red-brown brick, new Anita Cooke mural enlivens entrance to WMU's Knauss Hall.

New mural brightens a too-often drab landscape

MARK MAHER
GAZETTE REVIEWER

A large ceramic mural by Anita Cooke is now in place on the wall-face of Knauss Hall, above the entrance of Western Michigan University's Space Gallery. It is a unique and welcome addition to Kalamazoo's diverse array of public art.

Architecture and public sculpture on Western's campus certainly have a checkered history. Well-conceived and executed works well-tuned to Bronco needs and aspirations awkwardly co-exist with some of the most embarrassingly mutated fruits of our grand civilization.

It is within this context, and perhaps for these reasons, that this mural comes to us.

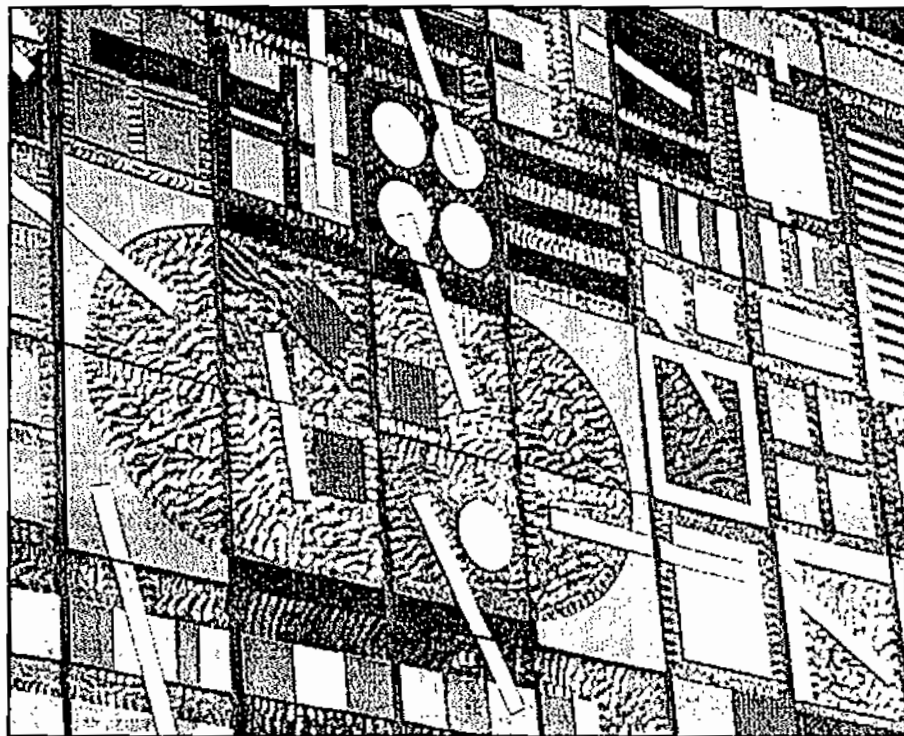
Ten feet from the ground and approximately 8 feet high and 25 feet long, the mural is composed of foot-square tiles in a fairly uniform grid. We are presented with a simple geometric language or landscape made up of variously sized circles and bars. The bars seem to hover, spin and flow through this matrix of

roughly-gouged ceramic tiles and randomly stained metal squares. Deep

ART REVIEW

and dark blues, and reds that fade into the ruddy brown of bulging, facade-less Knauss Hall seem to quote the spectrum of stained glass and so connect the work with the imagery of sacred institutions.

At first this energetic duet of circles and bars seems to hold no real transcendent possibilities, perhaps this is because it is iconographically related to the geometric flotsam so often used to visually enliven the text of teen-age beauty magazines. If expressed in a



painting, the composition would probably seem gutless.

But the firm arranging and setting in place of handmade, artificially flawed and delicately colored tiles speaks with a sense of presence and permanence, the sort of which is not available to painters. The ceramic bars cascade and tumble diagonally from front to back and left to right, oblivious to, or at least unhindered by the strict grid patterns that seem to have spawned and nurtured them. The circles, so round and glowing yellow, are vibrantly content, if constrained within their foot-square cubicles.

Is there a perhaps too obvious metaphor being foisted upon us in this diagrammed, celebratory tension between formal orderliness and brave clay ingots flying free? Maybe, but more importantly, it's a generous and incredibly appropriate message to present within the highly structured, often dreary education-scape

of Western's west campus — an environment that nonetheless holds and cherishes a chance for truth and free expression.

As a banner under which (if the past is any indicator) an amazing parade of artists will share their work with the community, it is a generous vision indeed that is responsive, albeit on a very basic level, to the core conflict of all independent artists between societal demands for uniformity and the responsibility of the artist to question that conformity.

This metaphorical interpretation speaks perhaps too bluntly and addresses only the overt structure of a highly complex, very subtle and work-intensive piece of art. With age the mural's metal plates will become quite beautiful and the entire work will etch itself in our minds as we connect it with experiences within the gallery below. It should become an enduring beacon sent to guide us through the somber labyrinth.