

A lot to see at MIT

MARTIN MUGAR, recent paintings and drawings; BETH GALSTON, "Black-on-Black," an installation. At the MIT Museum, 265 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge. Beth Galston holds forth through June 28, Martin Mugar through August.

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

'Black-on-Black'

The experience of "Black-on-Black" is rather like stepping into a three-dimensional Ad Reinhardt picture. Beth Galston's constructions are a species of painting as well as a species of sculpture and a "participatory environment" into which the spectator steps. Here the blackness of the environment engulfs one and has as much to do with the effect of the piece as the fact that we literally enter its space as we enter a room and respond to its implied drama.

Galston always makes the most of minimal material. Floor-to-ceiling fabric panels and tall vertical forms of translucent black fabric are given subdued levels of lighting to help the viewer/participant feel that the space is both expansive and confined. If you come into it, as I did, on a bright day, you won't see anything at first. It's like groping your way to a seat in a darkened theater. As your eyes become used to the dark, the black towering columnar forms of the fabric, you could be surrounded by a Parthenon of dark pillars or by the trunks of trees. Shapes emerge from and dissolve into the black void. The path through the columns seems to open up and then disappear. To find your way out of the maze, you have to instinctively follow the turns of the passageways. Under ordinary conditions, you'd worry about colliding with those massive shapes looming everywhere around you; but, of course, they aren't solid. This accentuates the contrast between perception and knowledge, a fundamental ingredient of illusion.

The ambiguity of the artist's approach to space challenges us to find the proper path out of the labyrinth, yet lends more than a touch of isolation. Beth Galston's previous works have employed scrim to suggest immaterial dreamlike spaces where light affects mood and movement. Blackness has a different emotional effect; this is not a meditative piece, for disorientation, the loss of a sense of direction, carries with it a touch of panic. On the other hand, the landmark columns imply there is an exit as well as an entrance, and the touch of panic is no more than a fairytale dread in a space charged by the artist with magic.