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Art Review

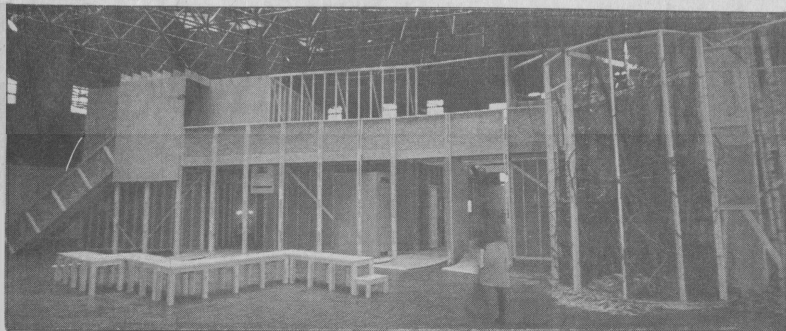
Making room for artworks

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

A rambling art village has been built in the Cyclorama, a plywood-and-studs assemblage of staircases, rooms, passageways, balconies and a big plaza that is home to 15 new works by installation artists, and is in itself the most brilliant installation of them all.

This astonishing structure, designed by architects Sheila Kennedy and Frano Violich, is the heart of "Installation and Place," which is itself the heart of "Massachusarts," a festival celebrating the strength of art in the Commonwealth. "Massachusarts" presents work by more than 150 winners of the state-funded Artists Foundation Fellowships, chosen by curators

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

A section of "Installation and Place" at the Cyclorama.

'Massachusarts' makes room for art

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from a pool of the roughly 500 Fellows who have won from 1983 to the present. In addition to the "Installation and Place" section, which was organized by art adviser Marjory Jacobson, there are exhibitions of painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, folk art and crafts, plus performing arts events and symposia on arts topics. More about some of these at a later date in these pages.

"Massachusarts" is a mammoth undertaking. And in a sad and sour time for the arts, marked by funding cutbacks and censorship controversies, its ambition and quality are hopeful signs for the state of art in this state. Still, it must be said that four of the artists in the "Installation and Place" show - Geraldine Erman, Jeffrey Schiff, and Doug and Mike Starn - have moved to New York since winning their fellowships.

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"Installation and Place" could hold its own anywhere, and it would be great if it could tour, as a sort of cultural emissary. On a more immediate level, it would be great if some angel would fund a catalog that would document this group of installations, since, by its very nature, site-specific work goes poof! when the show is over. Going poof! is part of the idea here, though. The artists weren't participating in the art marketplace. These works weren't meant to last forever, increasing in monetary value. Part of their aesthetic value is the brashness that results from this freedom.

This show's chief marvel is the sympathetic synthesis of art and architecture. The sense of temporariness and process of the architecture, with its splintery, unfinished wood, is a metaphor for installation art itself. For once, architects aren't trying to upstage artists. And artists aren't reduced to adding ornament after

the fact. Kennedy and Violich, who won an Artists Foundation Fellowship in 1988, have collaborated with the other artists and come up with tailor-made spaces and interesting routes in between. To dovetail with the architecture, some of the artists have used plywood. And most of them have limited their use of color, so the overall feel is monochromatic. Artists and architects faced all sorts of aesthetic and technical issues in this mega-show: Two installations involving sound should not drown each other out, to take but one example.

Even before you hit the main structure, you come upon the prickly individualism of Jeffrey Schiff's "O Sole Mio." Schiff, a sculptor, is used to responding to architecture, rather than having it respond to him. Unwilling to abandon the role of the artist-as-outsider, he created a plywood room on wheels, which can wander around the Cyclorama. You're supposed to be able to move it by standing in it and pushing on long sticks that poke through its walls and onto the floor. The principle is like poling a gondola, an aquatic image completed by the recording of "O Sole Mio," the quintessential gondolier song, that plays continuously. The song so grates on your nerves that after an hour or so you long to throw a wrench into the technology that's producing it.

A couple of artists pay homage to the history of the Cyclorama, a huge, round, domed structure built in the 19th century to house a panoramic painting of the Battle of Gettysburg. Wellington Reiter's "A Meditation on the Boston Gettysburg Cyclorama" is a shiny black and white parade of chairs, outboard motors and bowling balls that merges with a horizontal backdrop filled with obsessive explosions in black and white.

Jerry Beck's "Sparring Partners" harks back to the days when heavyweight champ John L. Sullivan trained in a boxing ring in the Cyclorama. Beck outlines his room with rope and fills it with images of American macho militarism: One

sculpture mixes a punching bag, a pair of horns, a wedding cake bride and groom, and a crucifix. In another part of the room are 10-gallon hats, a fence whose posts are either phalluses or missiles, and heart-shaped, Pennsylvania Dutch cutouts. In yet another spot is a moon-June-croon picture of a couple in a tropical paradise; next to this a bunch of real coconuts forms a backdrop for a wildly spinning pointer, a loony image. Beck's tweaking of The American Way is far more insidious than the art Jesse Helms and crew love to hate.

Landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh acknowledges the Cyclorama's shape, in a poetic trio of round rooms that are a meditation on the life cycle, with real flowers and drawings of flowers, real trees and trees tamed into lumber.

Some of the simplest installations are the most effective. Beth Galston's "Dark Field" is a maze of black mesh screening, the room punctuated by spotlights that blind you more than the surrounding darkness does. Jo Sandman draws with light on the walls of her all-white room. In Jill Slosburg-Ackerman's "Sighting" a mummy-like figure faces a room but cannot see its interior, which houses tiny fossils embedded in pristine plaster. Geraldine Erman's rhythmic assemblage of red beach balls anchored to boards with sinuous strips of bent wood is unexpectedly sensuous. In Doug and Mike Starn's "The Lack of Compassion," photographs of martyrs - JFK, Martin Luther King, Anne Frank and others - are attached to wooden planks casually leaning against the wall, the carelessness reflecting an attitude toward human life. One of the most powerful, and pared-down, works in the show is Denise Marika's "Turn Away," a room with a copper drawer set into one wall. At the back of the

MASSACHUSARTS

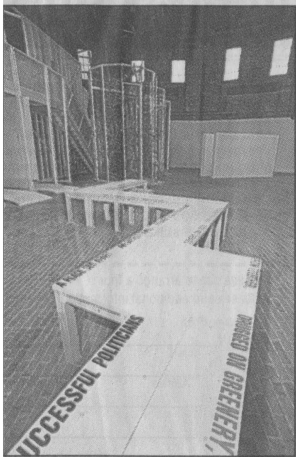
At: The Cyclorama of the Boston Center for the Arts, through June 10

drawer is a video of a nude woman lying on her side, turning away, over and over, as if rejecting a lover. By opening and closing the drawer, you can in effect manipulate her, and the work becomes a test of sexual power.

There are installations here that are bogged down with complex references and imagery that remain enigmatic until you read the artists' statements. Works by Lillian Hsu-Flanders, Joan Brigham, Eric Gould, and Ralph Paquin and Ann Stoddard fall into this category, which raises the issue of how dependent on verbal explanation a work of art should be.

An artist whose art is the written word is Ellen Rothenberg, who sprinkles verbal events through the show. Mundane objects are freighted with potent words: "promise" is embroidered on a white pillow, "hope" and "courage" on bath towels. From a second-story walkway you can stare out over the plaza and see Rothenberg's words, "speak," "right" and "now," ringing out. There's a megaphone above them, just in case their volume falters.

While the quality of the individual components of the show varies, as a whole - which it is because of that wonderful architecture - the show is stunning. There are few places that could accommodate this behemoth: Thank goodness for the Cyclorama. Another suitable place, at the other end of the state, is the giant Sprague Electric complex that may - or may not - become the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Mass MoCA has already accommodated a huge installation by *Arte Povera* exponent Mario Merz. How about moving "Installation and Place" out there for the summer?



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

Part of "Installation and Place" from "Massachusarts" at the Cyclorama.