



Beth Galston — *Overlay*, 1985, installation.

Kingston Gallery/Boston
Beth Galston

Boston is particularly rich right now in a number of environmental sculptors whose installations are worth considerable detour. The works of Beth Galston, Mags Harries, Jeffrey Schiff, Nancy Selvage, and Michael Timpson share little in common beyond architectural scale, but collectively they enrich our artistic community to a far greater extent than their rare appearances should warrant.

Beth Galston's means are minimal: sheets of theatrical scrim, hung from the ceiling by wire, anchored to the floor by metal rods, lighted by three ordinary spotlights. But her results are marvelous: spaces that breathe, perspectives which open and close, solid walls which become immaterial, and light which becomes substantial. And when her magical space becomes populated by actors unconscious of their roles, a wonderful theater occurs as if in a dream.

Scrim is used traditionally in the theater to create a distancing effect or a sense of unreality. Tennessee Williams, for instance, in *The Glass Menagerie* stipulated the use of a scrim to underline the dream effect he sought to create in his drama through the use of language. In *Overlay*, essentially a loose maze of scrim curtains ambiently lighted, fellow observers appear in a strange light, fade away and reappear again and again as they move through the spaces.

The theatrical effect of *Overlay* is dependent on the chance interaction between the spaces created by the artist and the experience of observers who become participants in an unscripted drama. As the participants are observed interacting with the environment, they likewise observe their observers, who become for them actors in a drama dictated by their own dreams and preoccupations. Galston brilliantly provides a set for a participatory theater where the division between actor and audience is successfully erased—a goal of avant-garde theater which is seldom if ever achieved.

But Galston is essentially a sculptor, not a set designer, and her work succeeds on its own terms even when the audience has not turned up to perform. The drama then becomes personal, and the solitary observer is left with an ambiguous space and his own perceptions to experience.

Galston's formal approach is reductivist and not dissimilar to the minimalist aesthetic which dominated the arts in the 1970s, although her architectural-scale sculpture is different from the work of that period. Works of minimalism are hard to talk about: there is no iconography to decipher, no art historical inferences. There is just the object in its purity. In this formal sense Galston's sculpture is as subtle and as basic as a painting by Agnes Martin or Robert Rauschenberg, and as such it is a medium for the private and often difficult act of seeing.

David Bonetti