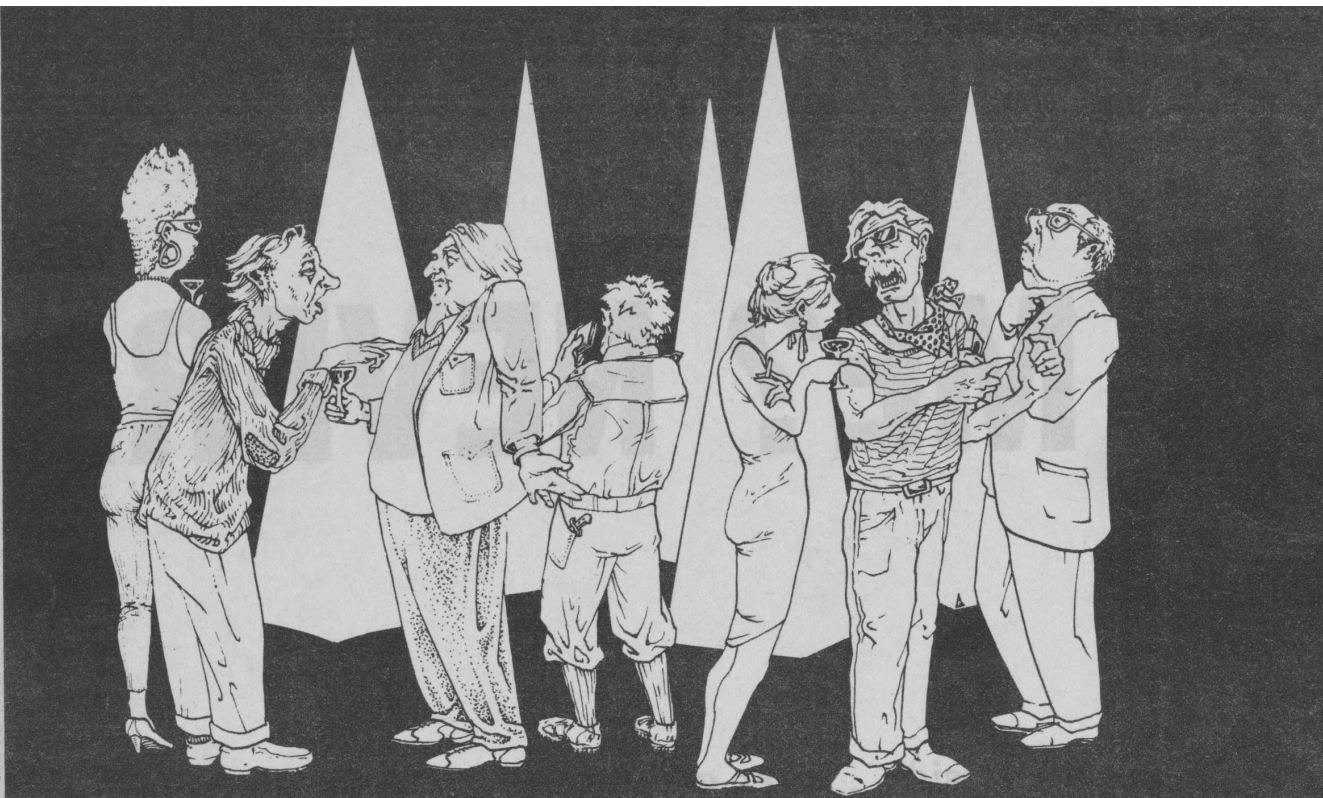


GREGORY KWATER



What's the point?

Some down-to-earth talk about art

by Bruce Morgan

The man in the gray suit leans down. "What's the point of it?" he says. I tell him I have no idea; to me it's all about Boy Scouts circa 1961, six cots per tepee and a triangular flap open to the sky where the long poles crossed. The man starts to walk off, then spins back to where I'm sitting. "I think this may be the low-income housing of the future," he says. "Or middle-income," he mutters as he drifts away.

Six gauzy tepees fill the dim room in the old brick building at the edge of Chinatown; outside, a wino sprawls on the lead-capped front steps, using a torn paper

bag for a pillow. The gash of the Expressway sends up a roar. Ah, the treasure chest of Boston — where invisible Indians meet deceased Yankees for chow mein and a nap. How can a person ever tire of this fabled metropolis? (When a man is tired of Boston he is tired of egg noodles.) We've dropped in to the Kingston Gallery on a Sunday afternoon to view an installation by artist Beth Galston entitled "Tepee." The opening reception is in progress. A dozen or more people are walking very deliberately around the room; now and then someone steps inside one of the tepees and emerges instants later, wine glass

in hand, looking much the same. It's a ghostly little village here; the beige-and-blue skin of the tightly packed tents is alluringly sheer. My eyes keep adjusting and readjusting to the room's suggestive depths.

I spot the gray-suited man standing by the refreshment table and wander over to get the latest word on the point of it all. "For me it has to do with roots," a young woman is telling him. "The tepee shape has been lifted from the culture of the American Indian, and I'm not real comfortable with that. I come from Indian country, and I know that Indian culture is natural and tied

to the earth. This is so unnatural and high-tech, it's a real dichotomy. If I were an Indian, I'd be upset at seeing this."

The guy munches a sesame cracker. "A lot of them are upset," he says. "Where they made their mistake was in trying to emulate white culture — that's what killed them. I see all this in terms of the future: bleak. The hole at the top of the tepee admits the holy spirit. The colors reflect different stages of spiritual development."

"But that blue is so cold and unfeeling," the woman objects.

"It is," I say, "the color of serenity."

We stand looking out through the tepee village where those shadowy figures move. It is very hard to talk about art without sounding like an asshole or a nincompoop. Has it always been this way? There's no vocabulary here for the common folk to sling around in the same relaxed way we might discuss brands of beer or cars we have loved or new movies and keep at it half the night without a pause. The silence this afternoon is more plentiful and loaded than the speech. "Nice," man will say after studying tepees for an hour, in response to a question about his opinion on the show. A nearby woman will offer: "I like it." A dissenter's comment, in toto, will be: "I don't." Back to the wine and crackers. Something's wrong here, ladies and gentlemen.

Luckily, I don't hang out with art lovers. Instead, I hang out with the hackers and misfits standing next to the good cheese. "I see the bleakness of the future in these shapes," the man in the gray suit is muttering. "All the real estate has been bought already. There's no Christopher Columbus, nothing left to explore." I like the guy instinctively. He doesn't waste a lot of time on conjunctions and relative clauses. Plus, he's got horrible posture and, being opinionated, needs friends.

"But what about the astronauts? Don't you think they feel like explorers?" asks the woman beside him, looking up, concern on her face.

"They're just doing their duty," he counters. "When they reach the moon they don't know what to do there."

The woman is quiet and thoughtful for a moment. "What they remind me of, with that blue, is something underwater. Cities on the ocean floor — what about that for exploration? The frontier of the sea?"

"Who wants to live there — unless you're a fish? Anyway, most people live in their own minds." He presses past me for another batch of crackers, and I

have to reflect what an appealing professor of gloom he is to bump into on a Sunday afternoon. I like the odd yet satisfying way he has of rounding off his exchanges. He is opening up these tepees for me, venting them with his spiky commentary.

Some new arrivals: two small children and their folks. The parents stand still, the kids zoom around, and around, and around, exasperating all. The artist watches nervously as the little boy and girl nearly fall, several times, onto the fragile netting of the tents. Whoops! Heh-heh-heh. Whose little boy are you? The next scene has the father crouched in one of the tents, shaking his son by the shoulders and growling, "You will not run around." The father is angrier than he wants to be, red in the face, and he's shaking the kid way too hard, and because of the transparency of the fabric his parental crime is perfectly visible to everyone. Art reveals us to ourselves, and others.

A new woman joins our party of misfits by the cheese. She had told me earlier that she liked imagining a whole field of these tepees, like high-tech wildflowers in bloom. Now she says, "I think of something from outer space. When we see bold, glowing shapes we always think of UFOs and aliens landing. How smooth they are!"

"With that conical shape, they remind me of the original space capsule," comments the professor. "What was it called — Freedom 7? Do you remember it bobbing in the Atlantic after that first flight?"

Sure do, pops. While the wino snoozes and the traffic roars outside, we sift back through splashdowns we have known and loved. Art is a wine glass we fill with meaning. At its best, a gallery reception gives you the chance to knock against something new and walk away blinking, much improved. It is a salutary conk on the head, especially recommended for those who already know the point of things. □