

AT INSTITUTE OF HISTORY AND ART

Albany art show mixes the extraordinary with amateurish

By Ken Johnson

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True to traditional form, this year's Mohawk-Hudson Regional Art Exhibition — now on view at the Albany Institute of History and Art — is a big disappointment. Loaded with amateur efforts that wouldn't pass muster in a college introduction-to-studio-art course, it is a show that arouses consternation, if not outrage, at the glaring absence of many of the region's best artists.

Every year one looks forward to the regional with rekindled hope that this year will be different, and justice will be done — the selection of works will be governed by relentlessly high standards of quality and the small, but certifiably professional community of local artists will have its day.

We will have to wait again until next year, however, for that mythical day, because this year's show — despite the jurying of New York *Times* art critic Grace Gluek, who rejected 660 of 773 entries — looks only a little better than another all-comers-accepted fence show.

But — yes, this qualification is also a perennial feature of the regional — there are some extraordinary works of art here.

Not the least of them is best-in-show prize winner William Ramage's *A Centripetal View*. This enormous self-portrait — it looks to be some ten by four feet — is an impressive photo-realistic tour-de-force in graphite.

Viewers may question the need for such an exhaustive exercise in topog-

raphical exploration of the human face when it has already been done so completely by Chuck Close, but Ramage, to give him his due, puts a slightly different twist on the Close mug shot.

By tilting the monumental face forward and lighting it dramatically from the side, Ramage gives the face a subtly thoughtful, inquisitive look that is wildly expressive compared to the deadpan physiognomies of Close.

Another satisfyingly ambitious effort is David Coughtry's *North Elba*. This large, panoramic view in oil of an empty field of unkempt, wind-tostled grass bordered by pines under a tumultuous ceiling of threatening clouds with pale, brightly sunlit mountains in the distance is a lush piece of painting.

More than just a display of technical virtuosity, however, *North Elba* projects a hyper-romantic, almost surrealistic mood as well as photographic focus and lighting reminiscent of Coughtry's direct art historical ancestor, Frederick Church.

Thomas Nelson takes the landscape in the opposite direction from Coughtry with his small, horizontal *View Toward Cohoes*. With affectionately intimate understatement, Nelson deploys a painterly touch that is miniaturistic without being finicky toward

evocation of the nostalgically ordinary.

Marta Jeremko pursues a reality of a different sort with her large oil painting *Ulica Piekna*. Here is a remembered world transcribed from family snapshots: Four children stand in the foreground on a cobblestone street as a grim elderly man and an old lady peering from a window look on. A dour, Eastern European architecture rushes along with the street into the one-point perspective distance to an abrupt and claustrophobic dead end.

There is an air of ominously puzzled melancholy in Jeremko's picture, as though its purpose for the artist were to discover autobiographical clues to the origin of some present unhappiness.

There are artists here whose features carry them far from the realm of perceptual or photographic reality. Among these are: Erik Nelson, who schemes out in colored pencil a dizzying complex and wacky dystopia called *Platform Living*; Enid Blechman, who devises a horrific dream of a toy train layout that threatens — like the vision of a mad housewife — imminent violence and is appropriately titled *Collision Course*; and Helen DeAndrade, who anthropomorphizes an unwieldy, stuffed Victorian chair into a clownish *Hopeless Romantic*.

There are a handful of sculptures in

the exhibition that will also reward scrutiny. Thomas Hyndman's *Dark Obelisk* for one, must be counted as one of the most successful efforts in abstraction of the entire show. A waist-high, square-section wooden post joined along one corner to a section of darker wood, it is a casually witty and elegantly modest work.

An artist named Sapu with an intuitively agile feel for sculptural materials similar to Hyndman's shows a pair of small steel abstract objects — one shaped like a water tower — called together *Three Mouths Left* (#2), and *Still They Were Married*.

Jeffrey Mohn's *Henry the Stooge* is a funny send-up of the cubist and rusted-steel pretensions of his more serious and self-important elders, and Dorothy Englander's *Beyond L'Estaque* weds lushly pointalist painted surface to small but unruly wooden assemblage vaguely suggestive of some funky landscape.



AWARD-WINNER — *A Centripetal View* by William Ramage