

ART

Images and Reality: Essay on Viewpoint

By HELENA A. HARRISON

THE Anthony Giordano Gallery at Dowling College in Oakdale, which recently became a satellite facility of the nearby Islip Art Museum, is now featuring an installation, created for this space, by William Ramage, an artist who lives in Vermont.

Mr. Ramage's work has previously been seen in group exhibitions at the Islip Art Museum and the Hillwood Art Gallery at the C. W. Post campus of Long Island University. The environments he creates are expressions of what he describes as his confusion "about the interactive relationship between two- and three-dimensional information."

For about 10 years, Mr. Ramage said, he has been thinking about the way walls define the space they enclose, and how that definition is influenced by the visual information available to the viewer.

He is also interested in the changes as viewpoints shift when the eye, located at a central point, ranges around a given space. This concept of "centripetal perception" implies that everything within view seems to be drawn toward that center.

The environment that Mr. Ramage has created is an essay on that idea, using drawings and constructions to transform the gallery into an inter-

play of real and imaginary space.

At the room's entrance, the artist offers a series of perspective studies of wooden folding chairs. These pencil drawings, traced over photocopies showing the actual objects, form the basis of both the large-scale chalk drawings of chairs ranged around the gallery and the wooden chairlike constructions set on pedestals.

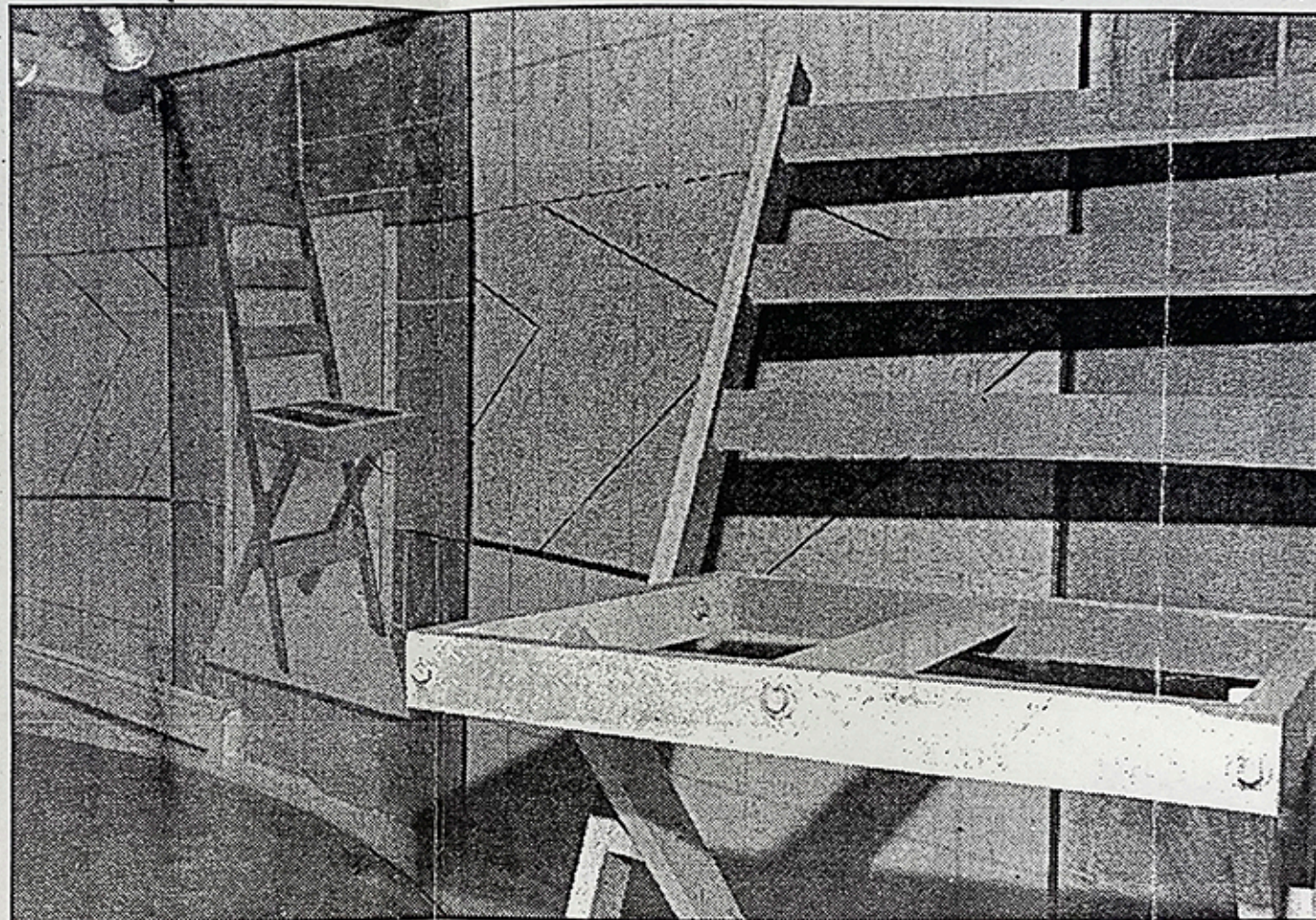
The folding chair is an excellent metaphor in which to embody the idea of spatial distortion at the heart of Mr. Ramage's installation.

When folded, such a chair becomes virtually flat, existing in two dimensions. Open, it is an object in space, with planes and angles that extend in several directions at once.

Mr. Ramage enlarges the chairs to giant proportions, three or four times normal size, and removes their seats so that they lose their functional connotations. As pure structure, they show how form appears to change when viewpoint is altered.

There are four "real" chairs, one outside the gallery door and three near the far end of the room. These are meant to be viewed from the middle of an off-center circle described on the floor. Standing there and turning in place, one also sees four illusionary chairs on the walls in chalk and tape, along with linear elements that further disturb the spatial equilibrium.

On the wall behind the central



Kathy Stanley Photography

Part of installation by William Ramage at the Anthony Giordano Gallery in Oakdale.

chair, a circle inside a rectangle draws the eye to focus on this area, allowing the rest of the room to fall into peripheral range.

In a statement that accompanies the work, Mr. Ramage explains how these two aspects of vision, the narrow area of acuteness and the much broader surrounding areas that we see less clearly, interact.

He believes that the periphery provides the context in which the acute,

or foveal, perceptions are interpreted and understood. This process places a high value on the viewer's ability to distinguish between reality and illusion, an ability that Mr. Ramage works hard to confound.

Mr. Ramage's installation rejects the traditional notion of linear perspective, in which a vanishing point on the horizon determines the rational placement of objects in pictorial space. Instead, he considers the eye

itself to be the focal point, making space "a sphere in which perception becomes the center."

We are dealing here with actual space, rather than imaginary depth and breadth in a drawing or painting, and so it is possible literally to place oneself in the central position. One need not remain separated from the environment, but can enter it like Alice stepping through the looking glass.

At this point, Renaissance perspective becomes an exercise in deception, confusing reality by its linear insistence and peripheral intrusions. Bright accents of color add further distractions to draw concentration away from the focal point.

What we learn in this setting is just how much our understanding of space depends on the interaction of what we see and what we know. We know, for example, that the walls of the room are flat, vertical and at right angles to one another, but that isn't how they look. That knowledge is contradicted by the visual evidence.

The chairs, too, are contradictory. Some are solid, others aren't. But when one stares at a three-dimensional version, the nearby drawing, glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, gains substance. Move closer, inspect it, and it flattens out again.

The various elements that make up the installation, including the lattice work of parallel and converging lines taped and drawn on the walls, the curving line around the bottom that echoes the circle on the floor and the crosses that offer secondary focal targets, are pieces of a perceptual puzzle with no solution.

The answer lies in the acceptance of our own fallibility. Each distortion is a clue, each misreading an acknowledgement of the gap between mind and eye.

In Mr. Ramage's art, superficialities are stripped away and the nature of that perceptual contradiction is revealed as the subject and substance of the work.

The installation, titled "Islip II," will remain on view through Feb. 26. The gallery, at the corner of Idle Hour Boulevard and Biltmore Avenue, one block south of Montauk Highway, is open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. and Sundays from 2 to 4:30 P.M. Admission is free.