

REPORT FROM ARIZONA

Not a Mirage

The rapidly growing Phoenix metropolitan area, which includes the towns of Scottsdale and Tempe, has become a substantial venue for contemporary art.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

One day last spring, in the course of strolling along Scottsdale's gallery corridor, North Marshall Way, I had two satisfying artistic encounters. The first involved discovering the work of an exciting young artist, hitherto unknown to me; the second was an opportunity to reconsider the paintings of an artist whose oeuvre I had previously undervalued. Even in the densely galleried streets of New York's Chelsea neighborhood, which is my usual haunt, there's no guarantee of enjoying two such experiences in a single day (though of course they do occur, and sometimes in much greater number). I certainly didn't expect such stimulation from Scottsdale, which I recalled from my Arizona childhood as a shopping district specializing in Western kitsch. There's still a lot of cowboy-inspired art in Scottsdale, but this rapidly growing adjunct of Phoenix, with a population of over 200,000, now boasts numerous contemporary art galleries as well as the ambitious, recently renovated Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.

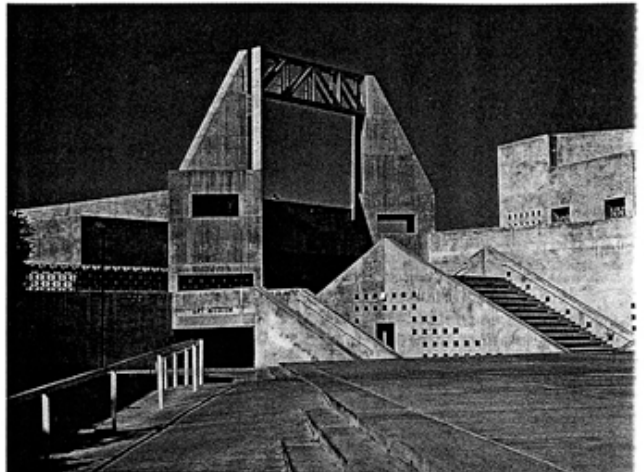
If I had reflected a little more on Scottsdale's history, perhaps I wouldn't have been so surprised at my artistic discoveries (which I'll get to in more detail in a moment). In fact, its identity as a marketplace of Western art and paraphernalia was more or less concocted in the 1950s and 1960s as a ploy to attract tourists, and some would argue that an interest in modern art and architecture is at least as true to Scottsdale's history as paintings of horses grazing amid purple mountains or bronze statues of cowboys and Indians. After all, Frank Lloyd Wright established Taliesin West in 1938 and Paolo Soleri began his Arcosanti Workshop there in 1962, making

Scottsdale the home to two of America's most visionary modern architects. (Both Wright's and Soleri's centers are still functioning and open to the public.)

In any case, when I walked into Marshall Arts and saw a room of paintings by Beverly Jean McIver, it no longer mattered where I was on the map. I knew immediately that I was experiencing one of those rare moments when you come upon a compelling artist for the first time, without preparation, guided by nothing else but your own eyes. What I saw was a row of five brightly colored, expressionistic portraits of a wild-haired, grotesquely made-up young black woman in a floral-print dress. The canvases were identically sized (3 by 4 feet) and abutted one another, but the presentation and framing of the figure changed from picture to picture. In three cases, she was cropped at mid-chest and occupied nearly the entire canvas, and in the other two views was only shown from the neck up. In addition, some of the faces, which expressed a range of emotional states from pain to elation, were closer to the picture plane than others. The effect was a bit like looking at a row of photos on a contact sheet.

The paintings, I learned from a wall label, bore the title *Five Days of Feeling* and were self-portraits of the artist wearing clown makeup and a wig. Mirroring the emotional shifts from panel to panel were the changes of tone within each painting, from the coolness of the flat greenish-blue backgrounds to the vigorous strokes of the red and orange that delineated the wig and made-up face to the more delicately painted modulations of the figure's bare skin and patterned dress. I luxuriated in the sheer painterliness of the canvases as I was simultaneously entranced by the drama of the emotional changes they charted. I also registered the fact that these paintings were grappling with questions of racial identity, but not in any obvious, prepackaged way, and that McIver had much better technical and conceptual command of her art than many better-known New York-based painters.

At this point I broke radio silence and asked a gallery employee for some information on the artist. McIver, I learned, was

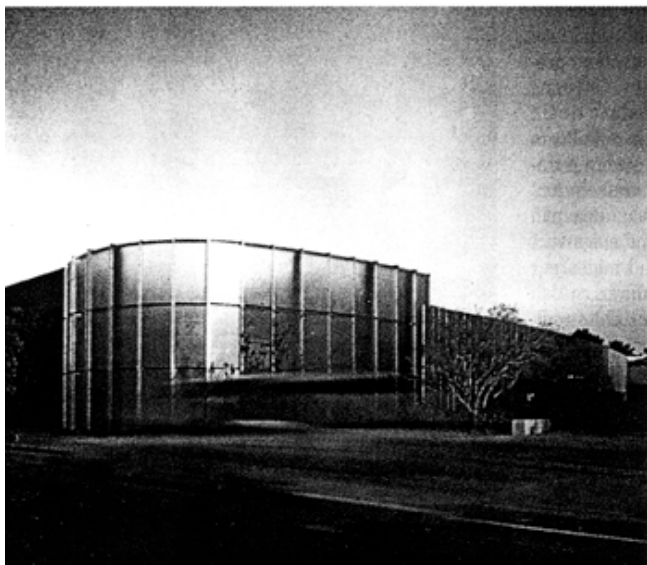


Arizona State University Art Museum, Nelson Fine Arts Center, Tempe, designed by Antoine Predock, completed 1989. Photo Tim Trumble.

an associate professor at Arizona State University in Tempe (see more on ASU below) and had just been awarded a fellowship at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. In a statement accompanying the show, she explained that as a child she had dreamed of becoming a clown "to escape my black skin, poverty and the housing project I once called home." She recalled that as a clown she was "disguised, embraced, liberated."

Running concurrently at ASU with the Hung Liu and Alison Saar shows, was a thematic exhibition of video works titled "Not Quite Myself Today." In it, ASU curator John D. Spiak explored the social construction of personality through a cohesive group of slyly humorous works by artists such as Alex Bag, Jennifer Zackin, Sanford Biggers and S.E. Barnett. Every spring, the museum mounts a festival of short film and videos.

In March of this year, ASU added an important and innovative component to its facilities, the Ceramics Research Center. Housed in a converted one-story commercial building next to the museum, the 7,200-square-foot center includes a gallery, archive and storage space for a collection of more than 3,000 pieces. Billing itself as the country's largest collection of 20th-century British and American ceramics, the center draws on a collection that ASU began in 1968; through purchases and donations, it has grown greatly in the last few years. Represented in the collection is nearly every prominent figure in postwar ceramics, from Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada to Lucie Rie, Peter Voulkos, Ken Price, Betty Woodman and Michael Lucero. Works are displayed singly on pedestals, as well as in an "open



Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by William P. Bruder, completed 1999.