What's The Story Here?

By Hank Hoffman

Narration: Emblem and Sequence in Contemporary Art

Creative Arts Workshop, 80 Audubon St., New Haven, 562-4927. Through June 30.

There are no stories in abstraction. Abstract art instead draws attention to its own materiality, to the physical or visual presence of paint and color, form and texture. This isn't to say that a viewer can't tease out representational ideas, such as suggestions of landscape. But the contemplative impulse in viewing abstract art is overwhelmingly formalist—these works call attention to themselves as "art."

But as *Narration: Emblem and Sequence in Contemporary Art* demonstrates, representational art is different. The premise of the show, a national exhibition at Creative Arts Workshop juried by renowned local sculptor Robert Taplin, is that storytelling, or narrative, is a resurgent force in contemporary art.

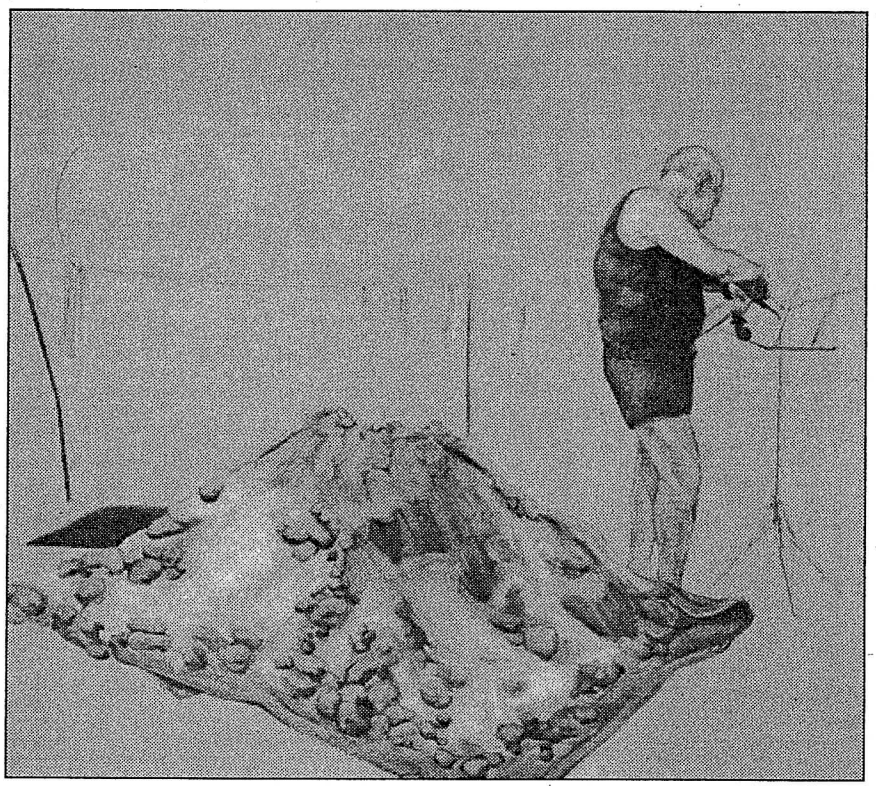
Taplin's selections argue that this narrative presence cuts across media. Included in the show are not only paintings, sculptural works, photography and mixed media but also the first video works accepted for a CAW juried show.

"Auntie," an eight-minute video by Kathy Desmond, was one of the two selected prize-winners. The subject is Desmond's 82-year-old Auntie Dot. As we watch Auntie Dot prepare her bed and climb in to go to sleep, accompanied by a restless orange tiger cat, the old woman reminisces in voiceover narration. Although small details allow us to see the never-married Auntie Dot as a woman of independence and resources—she studied at Rhode Island School of Design and was a teacher—it is her regrets that are central.

While her older and younger sister were "pretty pretty" and popular, Dot's brother mocked her as unattractive. She "can't remember" her father ever kissing her. "I think they took my self-esteem away from me," she says. Lacking self-confidence, she would wonder, "Why would anybody go out with me?" She "never felt old" until she turned 80, but her primary regret is that she never had a child.

"When I see mothers and babies, I think, 'Oh, how I would have loved to have had a baby!'" Auntie Dot says.

As a story, the video powerfully captures in its short time an essence of this woman's life. Showing her preparing for sleep—with its allusions to death—is a nice symbolic touch. Technically, however, the work suffers from a common problem with VHS art videos: poor resolution.



Julie Comnick's oil on canvas "Funeral for an Undertaker."

Several of the works are realist figurative paintings. Representational paintings of people always carry with them an implied narrative. We see individuals, even in depictions shorn of defining context, and we are moved to reflect on their stories. Often, a work's title signifies the context.

In Eileen Eder's "Wes at 19," a young man sits barefoot and with hands clasped in a swivel chair. He stares blankly off to his left. The details add up to a portrait of a boy on the cusp of manhood. On the floor behind him is a toy car, a symbol of childhood being left behind. Near one of his feet is a set of keys, waiting to be picked up. On the wall above his head is a poster of a nude woman. Propped against the wall is a push broom with a dust rag atop its long handle. On his left wrist is a wristwatch: a timepiece. The painting, in also being a "time piece," reflects Robert Taplin's thematic construct that the works "situate themselves at that peculiar juncture between time passing and time arrested which is the magic locus of narrative art."

Where the title of "Wes at 19" illuminates the work, the title of Julie Comnick's "Funeral for an Undertaker" elucidates little. The painting itself is stark. Against a yellowish field, a pile of dirt and rocks in the foreground are heaped on a blue dropcloth. The edge of a freshly dug grave is visible behind the dirt pile. On the right, a man in a sleeveless T-shirt and boxer shorts plays a violin. His face is turned away from us. His music stand holds no score. Behind the grave, a couple of spindly green poles—a third is suggested but not visible behind the man—support a wire draped with five salmon-pink-colored items.

Why an undertaker? What are the items on the line? Why does the violinist have a music stand if he is, presumably, playing from memory? The empty background, the blank stand, the hole in the ground—all can symbolize absence. Perhaps the pile of dirt represents presence, what has been taken out; it certainly has a pre-eminent visual presence in the painting. And the violinist? Is he creating music out of loss—art as a transcendence of mortality? Short of asking Comnick, "So, wassup?" we are left to wonder.

In traditional narrative art, representation was/is straightforward. Not so in much of the work in this show.

Many, perhaps most, of the works are so obscure that they resist the thematic notion of "narrative." Yes, they suggest that a "story" or "stories" exist behind, within or around them. But in almost every case, the artist willfully withholds the key to unlock the narrative.

For example, Cynthia Guild's "Night Passage" features a dozen vertical monotype panels filled with stormy imagery. There are silhouettes of trees seemingly consumed by fire. A flutter of wings. Turbulent ocean waves. A mysterious abyss. It is hard to avoid the concept of a journey. But what kind of journey? Spiritual, psychological or a journey to or through death? An ill-fated red-eye flight on a bargain airline? Is it personal or is it meant to symbolize larger social currents? Similar thoughts are prompted by Guild's three-panel oil work "Dark Tales of the Interior."

"Antiquated Time," James C. McLeod's sculptural piece, earns its suggestiveness through materials. A historical threat simmers within the work. It is comprised of two thin rectangles of rough orange stone bound to a wood block by a frayed, old leather belt. The wood block is weathered and ringed by rusted barbed wire. The work bristles with intimations of imprisonment, punishment and oppression.

Bruce Kremer's photo and mixed-media collages include recurring elements—vehicles, maps—that allude to travel. They are mysterious and cohere well as visual statements. As narrative statements, though, they go nowhere. In "RC Airfield" a famous photo of a Jackson Pollock action painting is collaged into the upper left corner. The point may be to relate geographical restlessness to artistic restlessness, but that is an idea, not a story.

There is a lot to ponder here. Some works, such as Bernard Williams' "American Chart—Individual Liberty," approach narrative as a political statement. In others, the existence of narrative is implied by the use of text, iconographic symbols or multiple panels that have a cinematic or comic strip-like impact. These works don't, in fact, tell many stories. What they do, and quite effectively, is challenge the viewers to invent stories themselves. ■