

Women's voices, women's issues

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Rice Gallery showcases work of 11 artists

BY WILLIAM JAEGER
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"Children/Choices/Controversy" at the Rice Gallery brings together 11 women artists whose works, in curator Janis Keane Dorgan's words, "present slices of experience . . . of childlessness, of abortion, of miscarriage, of parenting . . . with the joy and pain, anger and guilt, patience, determination and humor of the human condition."

These are big issues, and a show that tries to enlarge on them deserves a good look.

As with any thematic show, each shape, symbol and scene is interpreted in light of the show as a whole. Sometimes this is a big help, though the actual artworks often don't meet expectations.

Nearly every piece, whether painting, sculpture, photography, or some other medium, has a warm organic feel that incorporates figurative forms. Even the most abstract pieces are meant to be readable, so the content of the work is available.

The two 5-by-4-foot oil and mixed media paintings by Dorothea Osborn are nearly abstract, and their rough gestural strokes, layers of paint and pastel and overall graceful forms give them an interesting visual complexity. "Beginnings," the more compelling work, shows a ruddy orange swirl cradling a

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Art review

"CHILDREN/CHOICES/CONTROVERSY: WHAT'S A WOMAN TO DO?"

■ **WHERE:** Rice Gallery at the Albany Institute of History & Art, 135 Washington Ave., Albany.

■ **WHEN:** Through May 28. Hours: Wednesday-Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. Free.

dark grey oval, suggesting a womb, or a head pushing out of the mother. The flesh-colored edges of the painting and the rowdy, centripetal energy leading to the darker center make it both intimate and mysteriously cosmic.

Seeing this in another show, you might interpret the work very differently. Osborn herself stresses formal concerns: "The surface is constructed and deconstructed with various tools, this in turn produces tension between surface and space, representation and abstraction." We can, it is true, feel in the densely colored surface the gestation and birth of this painting — her act of painting — itself, and that is what sustains it.

Other strong, gestural works include a pair of 4-by-3-foot charcoal/graphite/pastel works by Robin Arnold. "Enfants Perdus (Lost Children)" and "Issue" both overwhelm you with mainly dark, streaky masses that coalesce into the heads and bodies of people against gloomy, vague backgrounds. "Issue" shows a dark figure with shadowy arms carrying a nearly white infant. The mood is ominous and despairing, and we suspect something is awry.

"Lost Children" says more and is almost unbearably sad. A dark shadow of a figure stands in back, to the right, and a woman sits or kneels below him, her charcoal hair wildly unfurled. A ghostly grey figure hovers above her on the left, cloaked and skull-like, looking away, a grim reaper glowing brighter than the couple in sadness. As you look, more and more of the work clarifies, as

forms make sense out of the heavy layers of lines. These are visually and emotionally wonderful works.

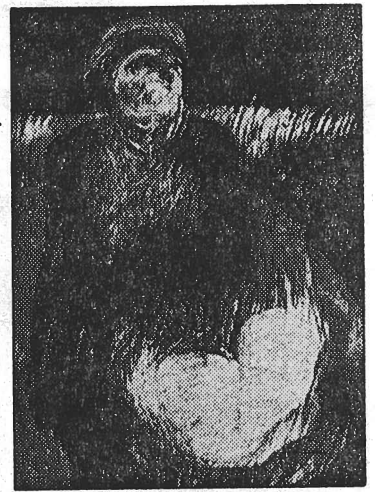
Equally well resolved, but tripping over themselves with lightness and humor, are the three wood sculptures by Marjorie White Williams. In one (untitled), a pair of winged creatures with human heads are each cut from heavy plywood. The bodies and limbs are assembled at crazy angles, and the creatures seem to dance together. One has dozens of baby plywood figures clinging to its central body. The other figure is equipped as a male, and it is decorated with small angular bits of wood along its legs and central body.

Nearby is a White sculpture called "Longimamma," a 2-foot wooden sphere covered with over 50 breast-shaped, unpainted wood protrusions. It is extroverted, funny, and a little outrageous. It succeeds in formal terms, and it remains surprising even after you've fully taken it in, perhaps because the idea of a creature that is 100 percent breast is so elegantly succinct.

Far more mundane, the 7-foot-high oil painting by Barbara Mungall, "In the Studio," shows a sunlit room with three figures. A straight-faced young woman stares into space, another woman stands at a counter, her back toward us as she works on something, and a boy sits on the floor looking around him in a contorted way, as if levitating slightly.

This is more than a descriptive painting, though it succeeds in describing a sense of place, light and moment. The three people are presented individually, as if unaware of each other, yet you feel they are very much a unit, a family. Here we have an illustration for the show's subtitle, "What's a Woman to Do?" The artist has found that one way to raise children and be an artist is to combine the two activities.

Some of the most puzzling works here are Kate Leavitt's refined, medium-sized pieces that seem to imply the nearly impossible state of being a working woman (not necessarily a mother) in our times. "Tied Down" is a finely detailed pencil



"ISSUE" by Robin Arnold

drawing of a huge wooden corkscrew coated with a kind of dense penciled-in fur. A horizontal stretch of flowery fabric ties a neat knot around the shaft of the screw. Suggestive, and beautiful.

Both "Slow Climb Out," a vivid black-ink linoleum block print, and "No Way Out," a wonderfully textural lithograph, use symbolic objects in a similar way. Each is broken into several separate sections, and each shows in one area a ladder rising out of sight. A partial figure of woman and an odd funnel-shaped object decorated with a floral pattern also appear. We feel these are objects of work, of oppression, and the ladder presents escape of some kind.

Some of the remaining works are also interesting and carefully made. Willie Marlowe's 6-by-6-inch, vivid, highly detailed fantasies showing improbable organic forms are colorful and impeccable, and some of Gail Nadeau's 14 small painted-over photographs from her "100 Angels" series are curious and fascinating, if not always rewarding in the copy photographs on view.

Overall, "Children/Choices/Controversy" is a mixed show (much of the work not mentioned is weak) that falls far short of the curator's best hopes. Controversy, for example, is miles away. But the theme has served to gather artworks by and about women, and some of those works succeed in their own ways, one by one.