

Williams show expresses imagination, wit

By Ken Johnson

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Anyone passingly aware of the Albany art scene will recognize Marjorie White Williams' sculptures. Her massive, toy-like structures of lathe-turned laminated plywood can be depended on to appear every time there's a group show of local artists — with such regularity, in fact, that one's impulse is to grant them little more than that instant of immediate recognition and then move on to something less familiar.

Part of the problem is that seen one at a time, Williams' sculptures seem gimmicky and formulaized. There is always something immediately attractive about them — they have an engaging folk art-like humor and are made with an industrious craftiness that is impressive without being overbearing.

Yet in large part, the way they look seems to result from the mechanics of the laminating and turning process so that their formal qualities are di-

vorced in certain ways from what they are meant to be about. In shape, in physical presence, they often conform to Williams' ideas the way a wooden shoe fits — or misfits — a real human foot.

This is unfortunate, because a whole show of her sculptures — there is one at the Ann Grey Gallery in Saratoga through Aug. 3 — works quite persuasively to convince the viewer that this is an artist of considerable energy, imagination, wit and passion.

And what is especially heartening about the progress of this artist, who has been practicing since 1950, is that her most recent work is her strongest. Where a lesser artist would remain complacently satisfied with the more mindless aspects of woodcraft, Williams has been pushing her art away from predictable recipes toward more personally felt, darker issues of global politics, nuclear war and death. Along the way, the work has acquired new, promising, formal dimensions.

Head is one of the best of these. A

huge black thing reminiscent in shape of a medieval knight's helmet, it opens in front as two hinged doors which expose a dark hollow maw. This interior space is populated with a lot of doll-like, bowling pin-shaped figures with grotesque painted faces.

In *At the End of Our Exploring*, Williams departs almost entirely from her trademark stylizing. Within a spherical, cage-like structure painted black and measuring 42 inches in

diameter, a pair of chiseled faces — one an old man or woman, the other a baby — are nose-to-nose. Each face is mounted at the narrow end of a truncated cone, the base of which forms the outer surfaces of the sphere.

It is an inventive illustration for the poem from whence is derived its title, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which Williams quotes on a wall label:

"... the end of all our exploring/will be to arrive where we started/and know the place for the first time."