

BERNARD APTEKAR ART AND POLITICS



January 24 - March 8, 1984

THE FINE ARTS CENTER ART GALLERY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

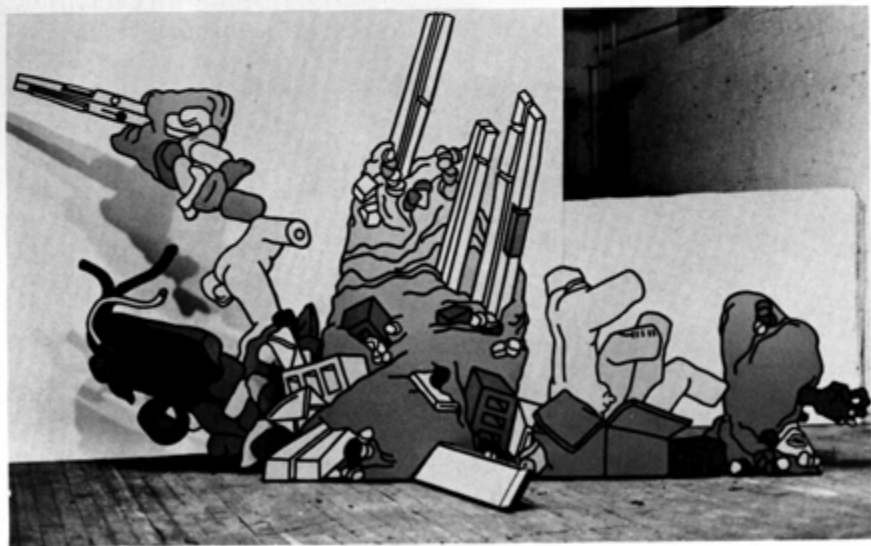
I would like to express my gratitude to guest curator James H. Rubin, Associate Professor, Art Department, State University of New York at Stony Brook, who developed this exhibition and contributed the catalogue essay.

Thanks are due to Robert Heller, Technical Director, and Edgar Stroke, Assistant Technical Director, of the Fine Arts Center, for assisting with the installation. We are also grateful to the Art Gallery interns who assisted with the organization of this exhibition.

Special thanks are also extended to Ellen Kahn.

Most of all, we wish to thank Bernard Apteкар for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director



THEY TURN EVERYTHING INTO GARBAGE

Cover: *THE MARTYDOM OF RACES AND SEXES* and *REJECTION AND BREAKAWAY*
from *THE DEFEAT OF THE CITY OF PLUTONIUM*

Photographs by Nick Amplo

BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS

Bernard Aptekar's world of brightly colored, cutout-like sculptures is, the artist maintains, as initially deceptive as the modern world that is his subject matter. Taking their style from cartoons and their imagery from popular American culture, his works appeal to us on a disarmingly primal level. Yet they illustrate scenes of sinister violence, exploitation, and hypocrisy, and their actors and victims come from all walks of American life. The insistent theme of social criticism is sustained from the simple *Any Secretary of State*, a single, Disney-like animal-faced character holding a machine gun, to the monumental, multiple-piece, hanging and standing *Defeat of the City of Plutonium*. The latter combines a kind of camp humor and serious ambition, universality and specificity, ambiguity and contradiction reminiscent of Courbet's *Studio of the Painter*, with all of society passing through it. Like Courbet, too, Aptekar uses a style that rejects the sophistication of the mainstream.

Since Aptekar began to work in this medium nearly ten years ago (he refuses to date individual pieces), he has created four groups of works: *The Heart of the Matter*, *Defeat of the City of Plutonium*, *Our Men and Some of their Works*, and the still ongoing *Aliens at the Intergalactic Cafe*. Two sizeable single pieces, *One Head* and *They Turn Everything into Garbage*, complement the four groups. Of the groups, each consists of several single pieces that can be arranged in different ways. Sometimes a piece within an ensemble has its own title, such as *See Merrily We Roll Along* from the *City of Plutonium*. Sometimes pieces can exist independently, such as those, including the *Any Secretary of State* mentioned earlier, from the series of *Aliens*. Or a single piece, like *They Turn Everything into Garbage*, could simply be added as a setting for the *Aliens* series or the *City of Plutonium*. The point is that Aptekar's work is an ongoing whole without concern for neat divisions into packageable parts.

Each piece is made of two-inch thick sections of wood clamped and bolted together and painted on both sides to form, in the case of the larger pieces, a kind of freestanding mural (to use James Beck's term). They are painted identically on both sides, so that one side is a mirror image of the other. These sculptures developed out of Aptekar's practice as a painter, as he grew away from the conventions of that practice. For one thing, they reject the portable, easily resalable rectangular format of the conventional canvas. In addition, the cutout concept eliminates the design or compositional requirements imposed by the conventional rectangle, so that the arrangement of painted shapes is totally subordinated to the demands of content. This new form of sculptural painting claims to an architectonic status, with implications



THE HEART OF THE MATTER

(as in fresco painting) of greater strength of statement, permanence, and moral gravity than ordinary painting.

It takes some looking to figure out exactly what is represented in most of Aptekar's works. The ostensible simplicity of the style draws us to it, but the kind of understanding implied by its illustrative appearance eventually demands involvement in what turns out to be the image's overall complexity. *The Heart of the Matter* combines two standing pieces showing soldiers among debris with a hanging piece representing pairs of lovers. Though the debris (note the heads cut off at the top) alludes to the destructiveness of war, both the soldier resembling a G.I. and the other, looking like a Cuban revolutionary, seem as individuals to be like sentinels, watchful and protective toward the infant figures grouped around them. Is this the natural state of mankind, even soldiers, when left to its own devices outside the "system"? And the lovers, who seem caught in a whirlwind of technology beyond their control (like the lovers in Blake's famous illustration of Dante's *Inferno*, canto V), what is their meaning? Do they reflect a primal state of innocence to which we must finally return, or a state of guilt, of lust which engenders political struggles for power and conquest? Each of us has to provide his or her own answer.

Less ambiguous is *Our Men and Some of their Works*. Here, comic-book, robot-like pilot clones unleash bullets and bombs onto a dismembered piece of torso or a clump of bones. They goofily grin as they themselves break apart the bodies of children. It is the apocalyptic specter of Vietnam.

The Defeat of the City of Plutonium is on the other hand a panorama of society, cluttered with figures going off in all directions at once. What is undoubtedly the central fragment (also the largest one) shows, according to Aptekar, the "game of life." The green form is like a football field turned into a blanket that smothers its victims. Football players and officials alike are raw material for a metaphorical meat grinder, the results of which are illustrated by the hot dog vendor plying his sausages. To the other side are scientists and engineers engrossed in manipulating their technological gadgets. Technology is one of the three pillars of support for this society; it is the central leg of the three on which the fragment stands. The outer legs show the working class — laborers subjected to their machines — and the middle class — clerks on a coffee break. The ladder-like support projecting outward from one face of the piece was suggested by the painted ladders. They lead upward toward where the second fragment could be hung in midair. This is the piece showing a flight aboard some sort of jet plane. Toward the center of this fragment, figures are motioning or whistling a warning of the attack by vermin. A heroic nude physically pushes them back; unhappily, a fireman gets caught in the mess. To the other side, the figures seem vigilant, hopeful, and determined; they appear to be

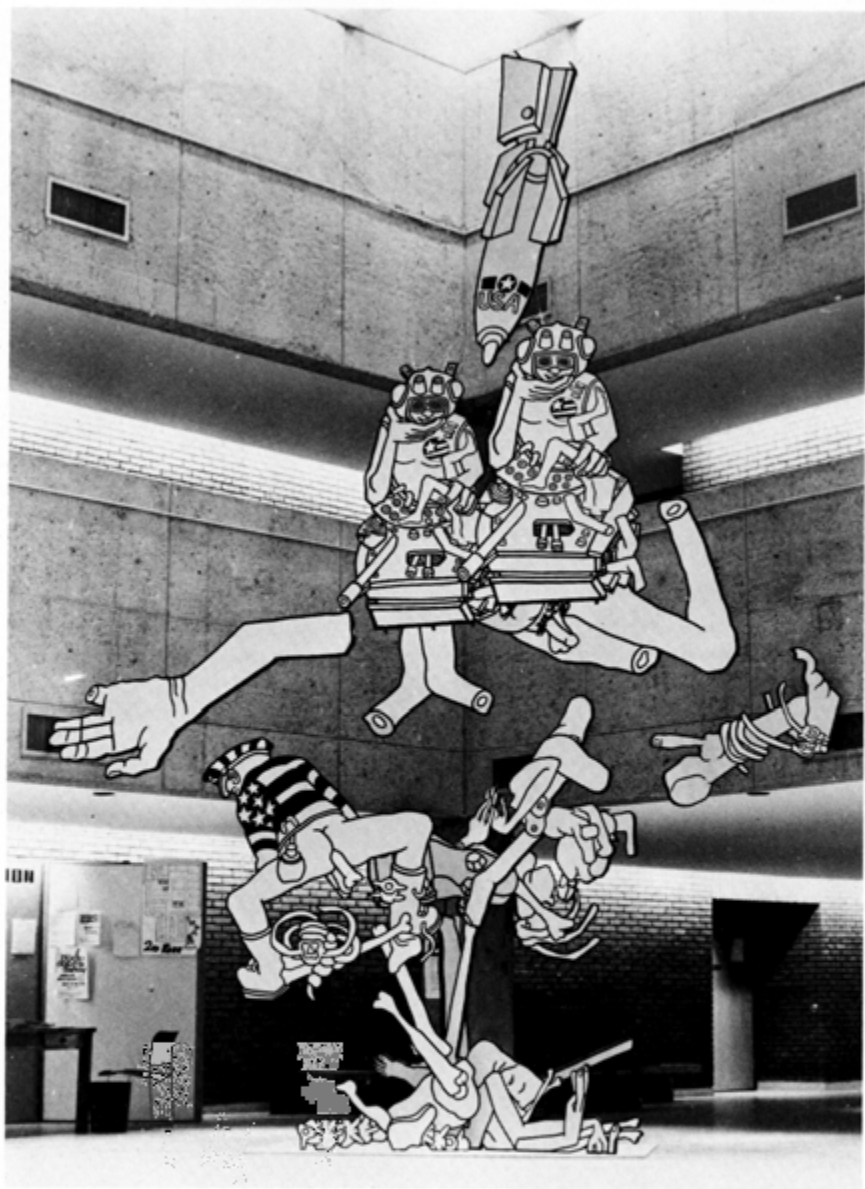
making an escape.

These two principal parts of the *Defeat of the City of Plutonium* are complemented by two others. The first is topped by a crucifixion — the martyrdom of different races and sexes. At its center is a brain kept in a kind of cage or aquarium, devoid of feeling and cut off from the outer world. Below, humanity is assaulted by the products of its technology. The second has its title, *See Merrily We Roll Along*, incorporated into the image. Two business executives out hunting row their boat through a mass of humanity already overrun by the products of their industries, represented by automobiles. It seems ironic that the industrialists are the ones appreciating a more primitive mode of transport.

The Aliens at the Intergalactic Cafe — the title a reference to *Star Wars*, though the group was not inspired by the film — is a series of separate and individually titled pieces. Hence, it is easier to read than many of the others. At this writing, the series includes the following: *Any Secretary of State*, *Cog from the Conglomerate Bog*, *Glad-Handed Glow Worm*, *Head of an Invisible Person*, *Sniffer*, *Sidearm with Nail Polish and Wrist Watch*, *Levitating Bionic Barrister with Activation Slots*, *A C. Invert-Advisor*, *A Feehzhishan-eets-kash*, and *The Ayorkochass*. Ludicrous or absurd, the titles nonetheless, as such, speak for themselves. Of course, some of the figures are more scathing than others. And the non-political *Head of an Invisible Person* does not really belong, except that the single-figure or idea pieces seem to have offered the opportunity for formal experimentation in ways not possible in the more rigorously programmatic ensembles. As a group, then, this series embodies the same scope as the *City of Plutonium* — its diversity and specificity, its violence and humor, its ambiguity and contradiction.

Although in his single figures Aptekar plays a bit more with color, his simple outlining and bright, usually flat coloration denies the painterly as aesthetic end in favor of an apparent narrative legibility. While its roots go back to Leger, Lindner, and Lichtenstein, the style aims as much at the illustrative look as at a "pop" effect of contemporaneity. Whereas Pop Art glorified contemporary popular culture by proclaiming its aesthetic, however, Aptekar's work is more a subversion. Pop Art's brash stylistic simplicity concentrates attention on its forms, while its ostensible political neutrality or naivete seems reassuring. In fact, the political subtext of Pop Art is at one with the successful commercialization of both its products and, as in the case of Warhol, its producer. All are celebrations of American capitalism and its offspring, advertising.

The attitude of Aptekar's work is a bitter ironic reversal. Using this style for its connections with the vitality and energy of contemporary life, he concentrates on the content rather than on the forms of that life. Here, it is Richard Lindner who encouraged Aptekar when he was Lindner's student at Pratt Institute in the late 1950's. Unlike other teachers, not



OUR MEN AND SOME OF THEIR WORKS



Bernard Aptekar in his studio with *THE GAME AND THE WORLD* from *DEFEAT OF THE CITY OF PLUTONIUM*



only at Pratt but everywhere, Lindner asked students to think about the content of their work — about what they wanted to say through art, why they had become artists, what their function as artists was in society. Aptekar graduated first in his class because, he says, he was so easily able to find solutions to the design problems with which art school teaching is generally so concerned. In Lindner's classes, however, he was pushed to go beyond formalistic thinking. When asked to make the formal strategies of art the vehicle for thought, Aptekar by his nature, and perhaps by his liberal Jewish upbringing in Brooklyn, had to think about the problems of the world.

The intellectual part of art in other words brought Aptekar directly to politics, even though he was going directly against the main tide of the sixties and seventies, during which the intellectual content of painting revolved around the nature of the medium. For Aptekar, the intellectual games of formalism represented a rationalization of aesthetics as a safe terrain for art, one which served to reinforce links between painting and the art market. His own path has led to the opposite result — the fracturing of that linkage. Aptekar is no longer represented by dealers: access to the public is either through his studio itself or through exhibitions at non-profit institutions. For one thing, Aptekar creates objects that in many cases are far too large and unwieldy for easy public consumption and display. And they are just too fragile to be practical outdoors. But even when he creates portable works — as are the individual pieces of the *Aliens* series — there is a political crudeness and mockery to make most viewers uncomfortable. Though sometimes the titles sneer provocatively, usually they are couched in such outlandish humor we become squeamish. *A Feehzishan-eets-kash* transparently gives the greedy physician a disguise that, to my ears, conjures up thoughts of wealthy sheiks. Ridiculously unfair as the accusation is, it is



ALIENS AT THE INTERGALACTIC CAFE

no worse than the disguises used by the A.M.A. When asked if he had personal experiences that inspired the attack on doctors, Aptekar replied that, on the contrary, his image was meant simply to bring the issue into the open. Similarly, his grim analyses of American capitalism and war are in the end born of an optimistic hope for change. Aptekar loves America, its vitality, its diversity, and its capacity for self-examination and improvement.

The contradictions of Aptekar's art are its richness. Playful, yet vicious, it confounds our values. We may try to limit it to one or the other — to either the playful or the vicious — but in attempting to do so we are weakening it as much as trying to understand it. Perhaps we want it to be vulnerable because it makes us feel that way. The resulting malaise is produced of course by exposing the contradictions of our own existence: aware of the evils in our society, we nonetheless continue to enjoy its fruits. Why shouldn't Aptekar's painting be riddled with contradictions? After all, as he says, he is just using what is out there. Self-righteousness is not his tone.

One must conclude with some reflections on the problems of political art. In subordinating form to content, such art often ends up as simple-minded narrative, illustrative propaganda; it is often reactionary in its formal means. Aptekar narrowly eludes these criticisms. His form is generated by content more than it is in reality a mere subordination to it, because he is unconcerned with the compositional niceties of predetermined formats. His painting is no more narrative or illustrative than Picasso's *Guernica*; his style verges as much on surrealism as on realism. (His early work shows roots in the former more than the latter.) And his images refuse the straitjacket of blatant propagandistic messages. Propaganda is never playful and ambiguous; it is ponderous and direct. By a certain criterion, political art devotes itself to a content whose essence is non-visual; it is merely topical, the opposite of universal. Hence politics in art is a contradiction. Such logic, Aptekar might argue, leads to the aridity of Minimalism; on the contrary, art has always been ideological — we saw that in the case of Pop Art. Political art is just being honest about its ideas. Minimalism reduces art to objecthood, language to commodity; its politics, Aptekar would hold, are those of the status quo. It is this kind of subliminal connection between art and politics that Aptekar challenges by exemplifying a virtually opposite style, content, and relationship to the potential for patronage within his audience.

James H. Rubin

NOTE: This essay was prepared with the help of an interview with Bernard Aptekar in his studio on November 3, 1983. I have tried to distinguish between statements or ideas directly attributable to him and those which are my own extrapolations. I am also indebted to an article by James Beck, "Bernard Aptekar: Mortal Combats, Moral Murals," *Arts*, April 1982, pp. 122-123. This article also contains an important statement by the artist.

BERNARD APTEKAR

Bernard Aptekar was born in 1936. He was raised in Brooklyn and attended New York City public schools. In 1957 he received his B.F.A. *summa cum laude* from Pratt Institute and in 1959 his M.F.A. from Indiana University. He has taught in a number of metropolitan area colleges and is now Associate Professor at New York City Technical College of the City University of New York. He has exhibited frequently in both group and one-person exhibitions. He was a founder of the 10 Downtown group of the 1970's. He presently lives, works, and exhibits in his Soho loft.

One-Person Exhibitions

Mid-Hudson Arts and Science Center, Poughkeepsie, New York,
February 16 - April 5, 1981

University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida,
January 26 - February 8, 1981

Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York City,
February - March, 1974

Lerner-Misrachi Gallery, New York City, March, 1972

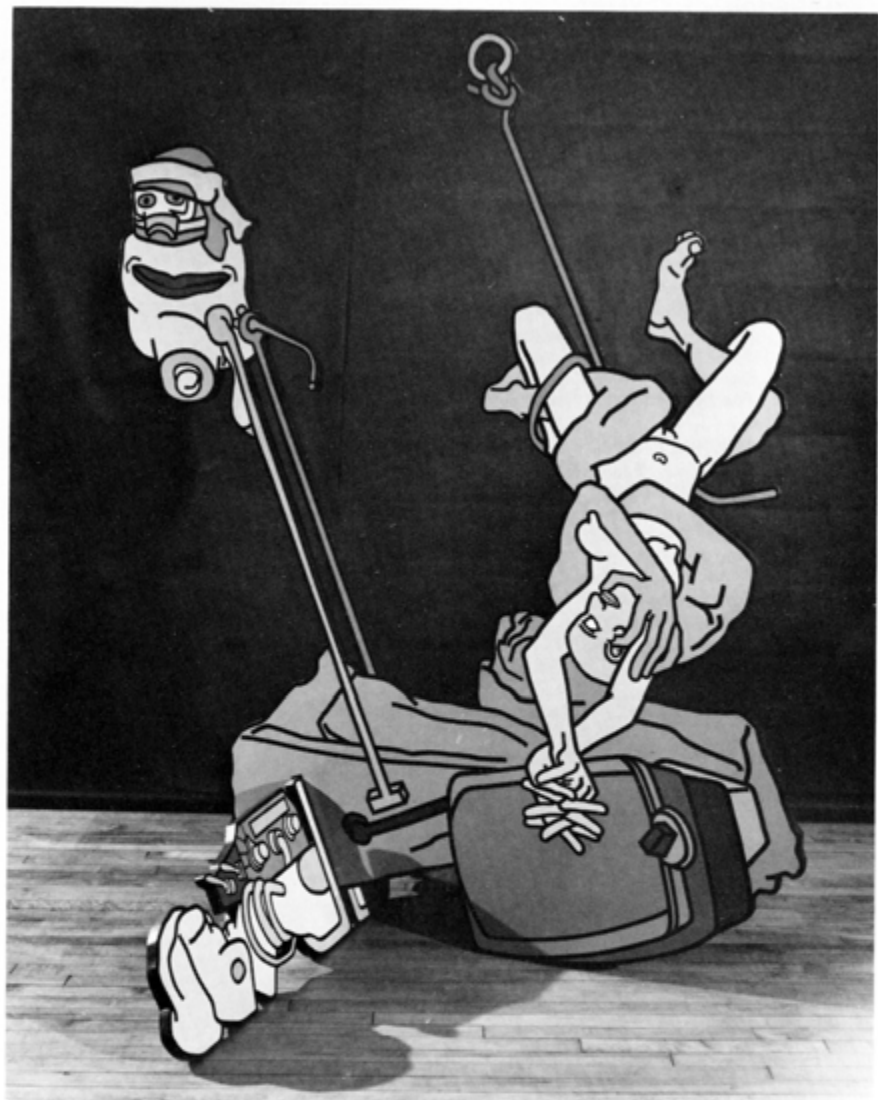
Livingston College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New York,
November, 1970

10 Downtown, New York City, 1968

City College, City University of New York, New York City, 1966

Contemporary Arts Gallery, New York University, New York City, 1966

Royal Marks Gallery, New York City, 1964



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Measurements are given in feet and inches, height preceding width preceding depth unless otherwise indicated. All works are on loan courtesy of the artist.

Sculptural Paintings

(All sizes are approximate)

From: *The Heart Of The Matter*, epoxy paint on masonite

- Lovers, 13 feet high
- Man, 10 feet high
- Woman, 10 feet high
- Debris, 3½ feet high x 6 feet long

From: *The Defeat Of The City Of Plutonium*, acrylic on masonite and aluminum

- The Game And The World*, 12 feet high x 26 feet long
- Rejection And Breakaway*, 12 feet high x 17 feet long
- See Merrily We Roll Along*, 12 feet high
- The Martyrdom Of Races And Sexes*, 12 feet high

From: *Our Men And Some Of Their Works*, acrylic on masonite

- The Bomb*, 7 feet high
- The Death Dealer*, 11 feet high
- Exploded Fragments*, 11 feet high
- Hand*, 7½ feet high
- Foot*, 6½ feet high
- Rotated Fragments*, 7 feet high
- Fragments*, 3½ feet high
- Torso*, 3½ feet high x 7 feet long
- Our Men*, 5½ feet high
- Our Men*, 5½ feet high

From: *Aliens At The Intergalactic Cafe*, acrylic on masonite

- Any Secretary Of State*, 6 feet high
- Cog, From The Conglomerate Bog*, 7 feet high
- Sniffer*, 3½ feet long
- Glad-Handed Glow Worm*, 3½ feet high x 4½ feet long
- Side Arm With Nail Polish And Wrist Watch*, 4 feet high
- Levitating Bionic Barrister With Activation Slots*, 4 feet high
- A C. Invert-Advisor*, 3 feet high
- A Feehzhishan-Eets-Kash*, 3½ feet high x 4 feet long
- Head Of An Invisible Person*, 3 feet high
- The Ayorkochass*, 3 feet high

One Head, acrylic on masonite, 7 feet high

They Turn Everything Into Garbage, automobile enamels on masonite,
7 feet high x 13 feet long

Seriographs

- Moving Woman*, 50 x 38 inches
- Hand Into Meat*, 50 x 38 inches
- The Football Players*, 50 x 38 inches
- The Hot Dog Man*, 50 x 38 inches
- The Rats*, 50 x 38 inches
- They Won't Be Stopped*, 50 x 38 inches
- The Coffee Break*, 50 x 38 inches
- A Piece of Technology*, 50 x 38 inches
- Man Into Machine*, 50 x 38 inches
- A Tough Citizen*, 50 x 38 inches

Drawings

- Study for *The Game And The World*, ca. 28 x 18 inches
- Study for *Rejection And Breakaway*, ca. 24 x 18 inches
- Study for *See Merrily We Roll Along*, ca. 18 x 15 inches
- Study for *The Martyrdom Of Races And Sexes*, ca. 18 x 15 inches
- The Mistake*, 14 x 11 inches
- The Anti-Guerrilla Warrior*, 14 x 11 inches

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- 1975** FACULTY EXHIBITION
1976 MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO
1977 MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNSTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
1978 LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL
1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONFIST
HOWARDENA PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN
1980 BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11. THE STUDIO FACULTY
1981 ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH
1982 FOUR SCULPTORS
CECILE ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN McCOY
1983 THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW

Director RHONDA COOPER

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

THE FINE ARTS CENTER



