

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## ART REVIEW

An Ethereal World,  
Explored Breath by Breath

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

**A**S far as exhibition titles go, "Breathless" is pretty woolly. But all is forgiven once you see the art, which is keenly insightful and almost uniformly beautiful. Indeed, there are works in this show at the Neuberger Museum of Art that take your breath away.

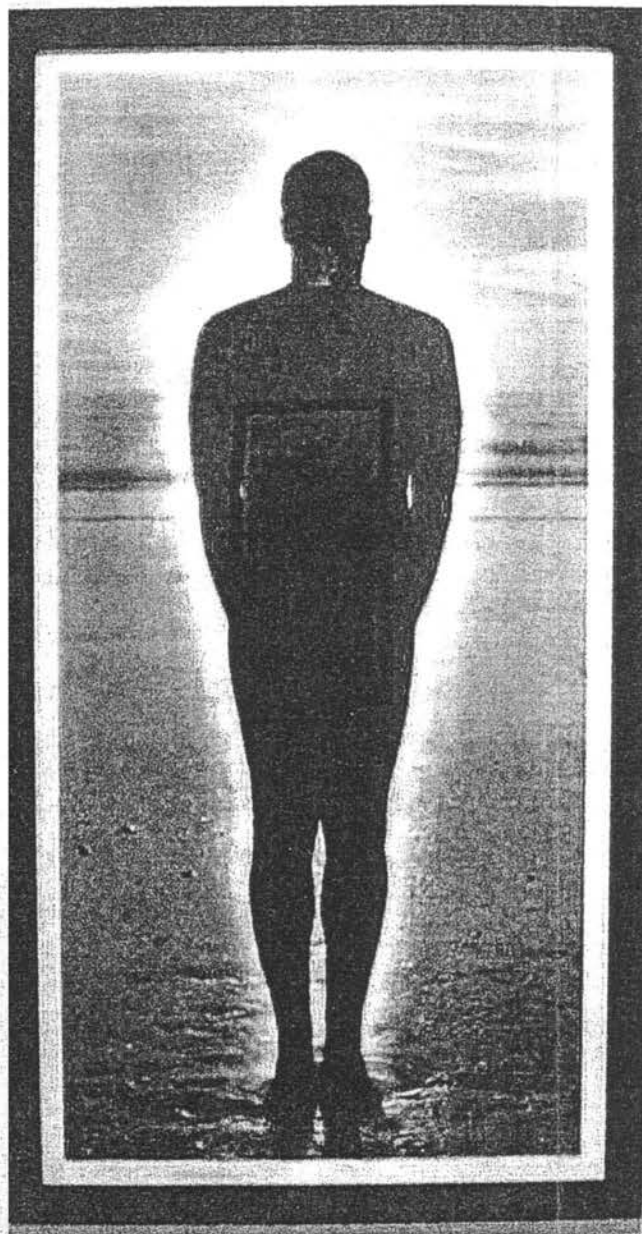
The show begins at the museum's entrance, from which you catch a glimpse of a subtly glinting metallic object in the final gallery. It is a tantalizing view, raising expectations of something special, something wholly unusual to come.

The source of the glint is an oversized, polished copper nugget resting on a dais, its surface gleaming under eyebrow-torching spotlights. The piece, by Martin Puryear, the veteran sculptor, is utterly gorgeous.

The rest of the show consists of about 30 drawings, paintings and photographs by a dozen artists. Most mine a Minimal-conceptual vein, and all are endowed with an ethereal quality that speaks of a kind of secular divinity.

Among the more unusual offerings are Roland Flexner's drawings. Mixing ink and soap in a dish, Flexner drips a hollow brush into the liquid and then blows a bubble over a piece of paper. The bubble bursts when it makes contact with the paper, leaving a random mark. The results are elusive, but for the most part compelling.

Sharon Loudon also muddles drawing and painting. Her artwork consists of long strips



Photographs by Jose Smith

Martin Puryear's untitled copper sculpture (1997), top left; Enrique Martinez Celaya's acrylic on silver gelatin print, above right; and Roland Flexner's untitled work, India ink on paper, left, are on view at the Neuberger Museum of Art.

of white paper pinned to the wall on which, if you look closely, you will find small, flower-like groups of brushstrokes in thick white oil paint. They are a little reminiscent of Robert Ryman's astringent all-white paintings from the 1960's and 1970's, but only a little.

Ms. Loudon's drawings do not appeal to everyone, for more than once I have seen museum visitors glide past her offerings in search of more high-calorie treats for the eyes. But there is a sculptural quality to her drawings that is unusual; sitting on top of the paper the brushstrokes feel airborne, as if the artist blew them out of her hand.

Much of the work in this show is experiential. That means you have to spend time with it, letting its depth and sophistication reveal itself. For example, it takes a few minutes for your eyes to adjust to the light to be able to see the faint abstract forms hovering in Shirazeh Houshiary's near-blank white paintings. Until then, you see nothing.

Ms. Houshiary's paintings are all about the breath. Working on the floor, the artist moves around the canvas with a pencil recording in faint, abstract marks the rise and fall of her breathing. Sometimes the marks are clustered and sometimes opened up, but there is always a great sense of control and focus. By linking breath and gesture, her body is wedded to the image.

Equally contemplative is Melissa McGill's installation of two conch shells,

emanating from which are strange grunting noises. The grunts are actually the sound of breaths sampled from the soundtrack of a movie starring the late Italian actress Anna Magnani. Ms. McGill is asking us to listen to the sounds we make between speaking.

Hanging nearby, Pat Steir's "Wind, Water and Stone: 6am" (1997) has a more immediate impact. This is a great painting, as much for its strident brushwork as its marvelous dynamism. Ms. Steir seems to have thrown herself into this painting, violently melding elements of the natural world with the world of the imagination.

Agnes Martin, the queen of cerebral abstraction, pads out the checklist with a small untitled 1978 watercolor and ink grid on rice paper plucked from the Neuberger's collection. It is a pleasant enough work, possessed of a dreamy pathos but meaning nothing. Or perhaps it just does not seem right in this context.

One of the hallmarks of the present moment in art is the wholesale appropriation of past art styles and ideas. Among the more obvious examples of this are the Cuban-born Enrique Martinez Celaya's attractive if overly familiar photographic silhouettes, recalling the photographs of Ana Mendieta.

Much of the work in this show is lofty and learned, more about art world styles, ideas and movements than about the world at large. That is fine by me, but for people who do not inhabit this world it can be pretty hard to get a handle on what the artists are saying. One solution would be to offer a bit more information about the artists and the exhibition theme in the gallery.

"Breathless" is at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, 735 Anderson Hill Road, through Feb. 15. Information: (914) 251-6100.