BY MICHAEL RUSH

This page:

Nene Humphrey—**Mother's Spoons** (detail), celluclay and wire, 8 units, 13–15" lengths x variable widths, 1996.

Paul Clabby—**Personal History, Public Arena**, installation detail, Fairfield University, Lukacs Gallery, November 1996.

Opposite page:

James Montford—**Will He Pee In His Pants?**, installation detail, 1995.

Richard Klein—**Shower**, brass showerhead and pipe, steel, burnt-out lightbulb fragments1993.

Sam Wiener—**Splendors of the Sohites**, installation detail, 1980.

From the canvas

Five Connecticut Artists Turn to Installation

AS THE COMING OF THE MILLENNIUM GRANTS US THE privilege of hindsight, we may begin to make proclamations about the twentieth century that actually bear a resemblance to reality. A case can be made that this century introduced the *personalization* of art through the proliferation of materials deemed suitable as vehicles of expression. Rather than following received imperatives by using traditional materials like paint or marble, artists instead felt free to choose, combine, and invent new media to reflect personal preoccupations and desires. The artist placed him- or herself at the center of the artistic enterprise, as opposed to the "representation" of the world that traditional art attempted. All manner of new means have been introduced to express the personal, creating, in effect, a free-for-all of new materials. Since Braque and Picasso affixed newspaper and rope to their canvases, the canvas itself has become a site where various materials come to rest (from Tatlin's constructions to Rauschenberg's electric lights and dried grass to Schnabel's broken plates).

But the canvas, it must be said, is the one material that has suffered the most in the onslaught, especially since the 1960s. By mid-century, as Duchamp's anti-art aesthetic (perhaps the most cogent oxymoron of our time) became a central notion, artists strove for art as "total event." The canvas was perceived as an artifact from a former time, as groups like Fluxus promoted performance art, body art, kinetic art, and all manner of mixed- and multi-media experiments.

Though the death of painting was surely one of the mistaken pronouncements of certain late-twentieth-century critics, there can be no denying that artists of the '90s, at least those who are gaining notoriety as representatives of the most up-to-date practice, are creating environments consisting of multiple objects or instruments (technological, industrial) in a self-defined space or context. This art we now call installation. As varied in form and content as the artists themselves, these works push the personalization of art perhaps to an endpoint. By using at times their own bodies, clothes, or hair, by incorporating objects that have no meaning beyond the personal (diaries, childhood toys), or by seizing their place in the world by proclaiming race, gender, or sexual identity, these artists are creating personal narratives that are as close to the self as any form of expression can be.

Each of the Connecticut-based artists discussed here has followed what has become a familiar path, from more traditional painting or sculpture to installation. As might be expected, each chose this route to break out of the confines of classic forms and to personalize expression.

As if to let the exception prove the rule, we begin with Sam Wiener of Guilford, a well-known iconoclast who made his first installation without really knowing it and before the term was widely used. A 1951 graduate of Yale Art School, Wiener had been interested in architecture since his childhood in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his father was a pioneer of the Bauhaus and International Style. Under the influence of his Yale teachers, especially Albers and de Kooning, Wiener's deep involvement with both experimentation and color was reflected in Abstract Expressionist paintings as well as architectural art commissions (the term "Public Art" had not been invented yet) for a variety of organizations. One commission he remembers in particular was his vast stained glass window design for a synagogue in Stamford.

Since his early days as a painter, Wiener also involved politics in his art. Whether in the form of antiwar statements (especially during the Vietnam era) or comments on the excesses or foibles of the art world, Wiener, established himself as an "artist/commentator" (critic Arthur Danto calls him a witty deconstructionist). His target became, in part, his own personal identity as an artist. In 1980, he created *The Splendor of the Sohites*, an ironic examination of SoHo culture in the form of a "museum" housed in an 8 x 20' dumpster constructed in the O.K. Harris Gallery on West Broadway. What would unquestionably be called an installation today, though Wiener simply referred to it at the time as "a one-man show," *The Splendor of the Sohites* traced the rise and fall of SoHo before the boutiques and restaurants. Within the walk-through dumpster, Wiener (under the guise of his alter-ego Evangeline Tabasco, an elaborate homage to Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy) meticulously arranged objects found on the streets of SoHo: beer can tops, full garbage bags, and dozens of discarded pieces of metal and iron that bore a strange resemblance to the sculptures then being shown in SoHo galleries.

In 1978, he created room-sized models of SoHo galleries (Paula Cooper, Leo Castelli, and John Weber) in which he mounted objects that evoked well-known artists' work: a bullion cube after a sculpture by Joel Shapiro, or a "roach motel" that looked just like a Donald Judd. Over the years, Wiener has worked in several different sculptural forms and only recently acknowledged that perhaps what he has been doing all along has been sculptural installation. For a 1996 retrospective at Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven, he transformed the entire center into an installation beginning with what appeared to be a "tilted arc" (à la Richard Serra) crashing through a front glass wall. More Wienerisms can be seen at the New Britain Museum of American Art through March 8, 1998.

Norwich artist James Montford makes overtly personal and politicized work that addresses what he calls "the African-American Holocaust," the wholesale subjugation of a people by white overlords. Classically trained in fine arts at Brandeis and Columbia Universities, Montford was initially drawn to the reductive, minimalist grids of Agnes Martin, while at the same time (the mid-'70s) being exposed to the body art of Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneeman, as well as the polemical art of fellow African American David Hammond. In the early '80s he reached a turning point when he ventured into a Ku Klux Klan rally in Norwich, during which he was told, "You niggers are the problem." "I was frozen," Montford remembers, and the only way to break the thaw was to place his life and art on the line, which he often does utilizing the damnable word "nigger" in his work. As you can imagine, this sometimes doesn't go over too well.

In 1993, for example, he installed a row of thirty-four locks of hair, placed in separate plastic bags, along a wall in the Fine Arts Center of the University of Rhode Island. Titled *Can You Find the Nigger Hair?*, this installation aroused enough controversy for one disgruntled viewer to rip the "N-word" from the title. Often dubbed "angry" by curators and the press, Montford is the very model of calm and measured, almost academic, talk in conversation. "The work is angry," he says, "not me." He's on a mission to right what has gone very wrong and art is his tool. He confronts stereotypes directly, with a punch so swift that he seems to have little time for metaphor, that common device of literature and art. In *Bowling for Niggers* (1993), he lined up a series of Aunt Jemima dolls in the traditional bowling formation; and, in the same year, he created *The Lipper Constellation* for Hampshire College: thirty-six basketballs arranged in a pattern on a gallery floor. A socially minded conceptualist, Montford is keenly aware of the power of his work to arouse strong reactions, even in African Americans, who have accused him of glorifying the very attitudes he wishes to denounce.

Montford's installations can also include performance, as in the 1994 *Will He Pee In His Pants?* in which the artist mimicked a lynching by standing for hours, draped in black from head to toe with ropes tied around every extremity. A tiny video monitor peeking out of a chest pocket played images of notable historical and contemporary African Americans.

The use of the body is essential to the work of Nene Humphrey and Paul Clabby. Both treat the body as the conduit through which their work flows and doubles back on itself. For Humphrey it is a vehicle for retrieving memory and literally fashioning a place for herself in the world as a woman and daughter; for Clabby, the body is what propels him to create at all in the solitude of his studio—it is his basic material.

Humphrey, a Litchfield resident, began as a painter in the '60s, but turned to installation as she became more involved with the spaces her art occupied and by the use of space she observed in artists like Mary Lucier, Ann Hamilton, and Donald Lipski. Coming of age in the early years of the feminist art movement also had a strong impact on her, as was highlighted in the 1995 exhibition *Object Lessons* at the Massachusetts College of Art. Humphrey was featured here along with other *(continued on page 52)*

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