

Works That Fit the Settings

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

ART THAT is intrinsically good can hold its own almost anywhere, but the viewing experience is enhanced when the work fits its site hand-in-glove fashion. Such is the case with two current compact shows — one in Union, the other in Jersey City.

The Union site is unlikely and initially unpromising: a patch of lawn in front of the Eastern Union County Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. on Green Lane, near Kean College.

It is off the beaten path. To get there, one passes refineries and factories, usually indications that one is leaving the cultural heart of a place.

But then appear four sculptures by Peter Reginato, all hulking without menace on the winter grass. They might be byproducts of this industrial environment.

The sculptures are made of mild steel, an alloy that is not as light as aluminum nor as weighty as full-bodied steel. And lightness characterizes the miens of the works.

The pieces are additive: flat sections folded into accordion pleats might be welded to circular shapes bent to form arcs, or to plates, parts of which are cut out so that windows are formed onto other portions of the sculpture.

There is an apparent confident randomness to the final outcome, and one can have a profitable time mentally

dissecting the work, noticing with surprise how few basic shapes Mr. Reginato employs. He merely folds them or orients them different ways to achieve apparent complexity.

Two of the pieces are low, essentially like boulders. There is a flagpole on the small lawn, and the remaining sculptures seem to be standing in readiness to salute. Those that stretch on legs are not as successful as the ball-like ones.

One of the reasons, perhaps, is that we expect the tall ones to be more anthropomorphic — they fail at this — while no one expects too much of a schematized boulder.

Another reason is the platforms on which the vertical pieces are set. The plywood squares seem makeshift and hurried, like napkins placed under glasses. One understands that the sculptures might sink into the sod; real bases are needed.

Another problem is Mr. Reginato's treatment of his surfaces. Rusted steel has been sanded to effect a blond and brown flicker, a color scheme that evokes the dead grass still flecked with brown leaves.

This is essentially felicitous; on this vigorous sculpture, it is a sign of vitality, despite the dispiriting season, but Mr. Reginato's marks are too artful.

They are stylized squiggles often disparagingly called artmarks. They seem but an interim solution and one that distracts from the three-dimensional integrity of the work.

But all in all, the exhibition is as cheering as a barbershop quartet.

Jersey City is a city on the rise, yet parts of it seem consigned to oblivion. The paintings of Bill Barrell at the Jersey City Museum, 472 Jersey Avenue, seem like mirrors of a heavy admixture of gleam and gloom.

Initially, Mr. Barrell strikes one as a follower of Jean Dubuffet, whose early work was called art brut for the headlong and savage way in which the painter attacked and gouged into his surfaces.

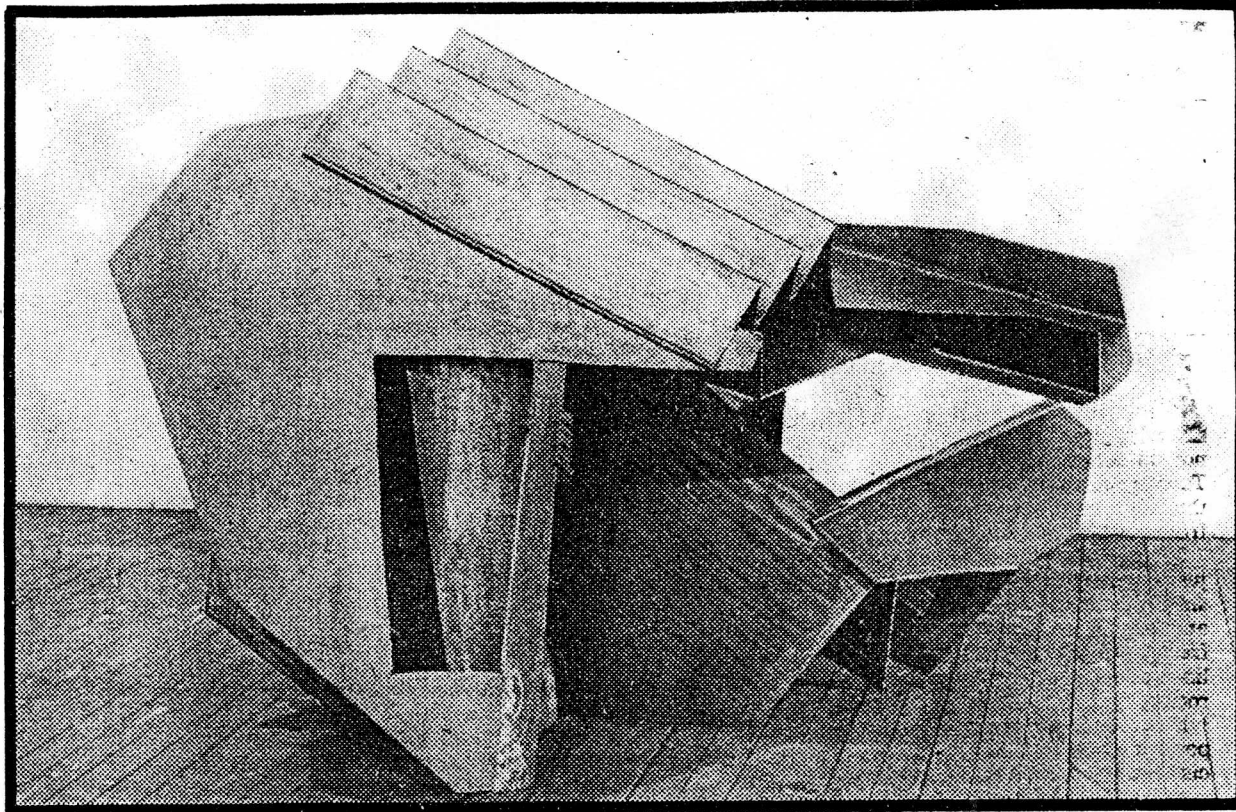
Mr. Barrell does this, too; his x's, hatchings and curlicues dug into wet paint seem spontaneous and felt, the opposite of artmarks. But from this torrid mode, Mr. Barrell can shift into lyricism. Some florid lines recall Raoul Dufy, and an all-knowing cat in the painting "Garden" might come from the world of Marc Chagall.

Not only formally but in subject matter, too, Mr. Barrell presents us with both sides of the coin.

The painting called "Mugged" is the perfect vehicle for engaging in a clash of pictorial elements. Mr. Barrell's flinging style catches the surprise and impact of the crime. An unfortunate victim on a bicycle has just got hit, and his troubles are not over, for shadowy hulks are coming into the fore.

On the other hand, "Arrival Home" is a daddy coming home that is drawn as a child might see it. But there is a skull hovering above the man.

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'The Oakland Girl,' by Peter Reginato

Mr. Barrell's ability to get down to the elemental through a child-like manner of drawing conveys a genuine sweetness in the matchup of the faces of father and daughter (the news release informs us that the artist recently moved to Jersey City and has a small daughter), but like the contemporary urban scene, true joy is alloyed; hence, perhaps, the death's head.

The protagonist with a picket-fence grin in "An Open Heart" is an everyman, one capable of religious adoration and also of low-down behavior. A purple heart (is the modern lover also brave?) floats in a reliquary box, but the doors to this shrine might also be a raincoat held open, and our man may be flashing his feelings.

At 50, Mr. Barrell might seem too old to be part of the so-called "new

wave," the vogue for expressionist painting, most of whose practitioners are young. But he keeps in touch with younger artists through having been a founding member of the Organization of American Artists, which works to place art in Federal buildings and public places.

Mr. Reginato's sculptures will be on view through Feb. 18, and Mr. Barrell's paintings through Feb. 26. ■