

ART

Bronx Artist Conjures Haunting Dreamscapes

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

TWO exhibitions do not a revolution make, but they can imply a change of institutional character. With its current shows — one a solo on the charcoal and oilstick drawings of Whitfield Lovell, the other a display of works by various artists in different media — the Lehman College Art Gallery seems to be developing a new, livelier personality.

Mr. Lovell's drawings do not so much occupy their space at the gallery here as haunt it. They are large images in grays and black tinged with or relieved by bright color. The subjects are ghostly — disembodied hands and hearts, a family tree with heads hanging from the branches like fruit, clothing inhabited by invisible figures and so on.

Overall, the works exude a mysticism that is at odds with the facts of the artist's career. These include a bachelor's degree from Manhattan's Cooper Union in 1959, internship at Robert Blackburn's printmaking workshop (also in Manhattan), participation in numerous groups at museums and galleries in Manhattan and the Bronx, a few solos, notably one held recently at the Jersey City Museum and several grants and fellowships. The present show is one of a series entitled "The Bronx Celebrates," which has featured artists like Ida Appelbroog and Tim Rollins.

In her catalogue essay, Susan Hoeltzel, the gallery's acting director, quotes Mr. Lovell describing his earlier art as "formal" and mentioning his travels in Europe, Africa and Mexico. Still, it appears that his stylistic conversion — in the mid-1980's — was born of pain over personal bereavement and of his reaction to paintings by Edvard Munch and Frida Kahlo, which, he says, gave him "the license to paint autobiographically."

Although Kahlo's seems to have been the stronger influence, Mr. Lovell shares neither the Mexican painter's fondness for stigmata nor her

narcissism. When he mourns, it is not for himself but for, say, his grandfather, who was killed in a mugging on a Bronx street. And it is as if impelled by a higher power that the artist commemorates the death of a sister in a dark gray scene of a head resting sideways on a pinnacle of flowers — a reference to the Mexican custom of covering with flowers the bodies of those who die before their time.

There are other drawings as powerful — for example, the empty dress with wings that is titled "I Did Good to Leave" and the purple heart with aorta that encloses a hand with dice in it — but none as beautiful or as affecting. Mr. Lovell's intensity is reminiscent of that found in some "outsider art" and he may very well be headed in that direction.

A mysticism born of sorrow.

the way, is not confined to the Bronx. This is a grab bag of 17 emerging artists, some farther out of the pod than others and most of them lively.

Michael Bramwell commands attention at the entrance with his neon "Giving Time Sign," which states, "The Lord loves a cheerful giver," in blue rimmed with red and a yellow dollar sign. Below are three church collection plates containing scattered cowrie shells (at one time a form of currency in parts of Africa and Asia).

Also mildly sardonic are the sculptures of Luisa Caldwell and Meghan Long. Ms. Caldwell's "House" is doubled, but the scale is small, and their surfaces are encrusted with finely shredded paper money. Ms. Long takes six rather unsightly lumps of polyester resin, enclosing them in a transparent red stocking, and lays them in a semicircle on a pedestal with the title "Procreation." One might reach for Eileen Doktorski's "Night Cabinet" in a nightmare, but even then, not willingly. This peculiar piece of furniture made of wood smudged with green and cerulean has a complex superstructure, a side that balloons and legs that seem about to buckle. Its nearest relatives are the melting watches of Salvador Dalí.

"Selections" is the first in a series of exhibitions drawn from the gallery's newly established registry of photographic slides of artists' works, which, by

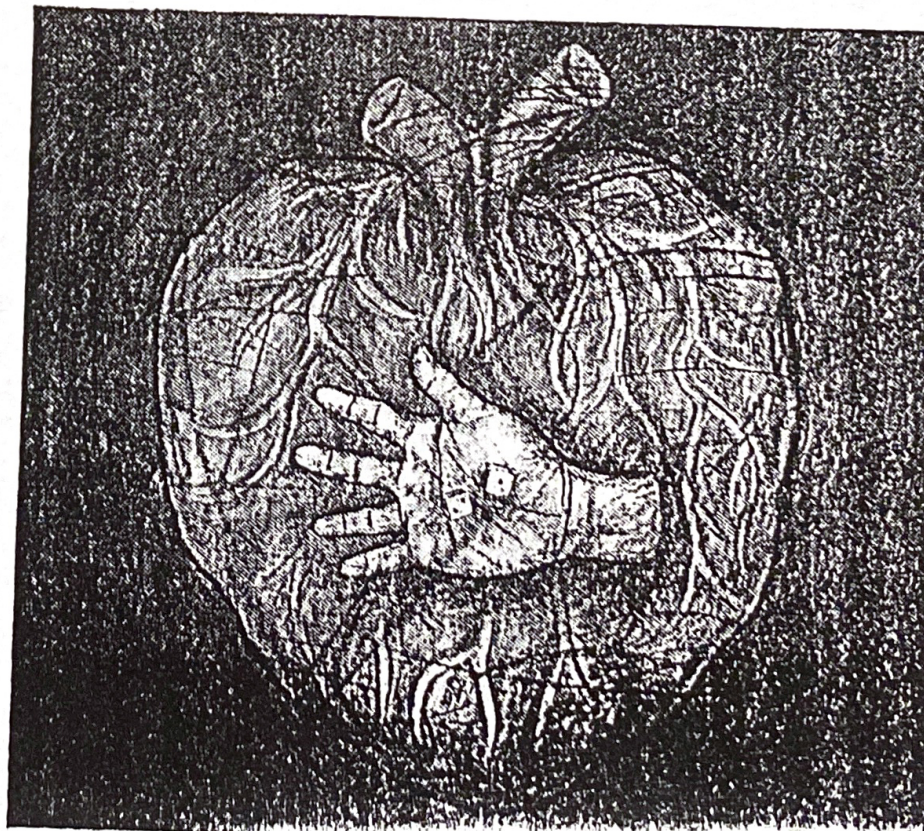
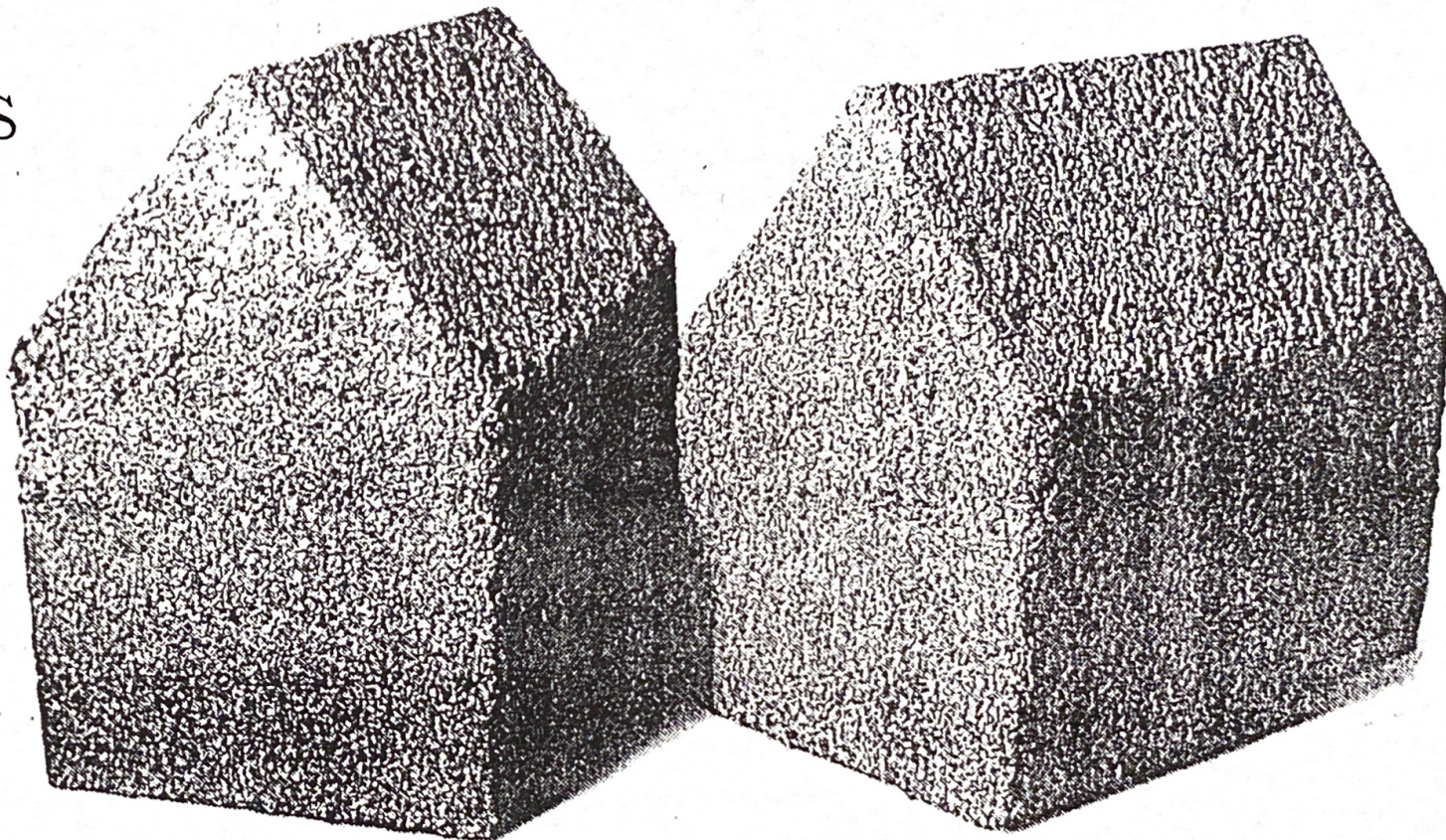
"House," a sculpture by Luisa Caldwell, at Lehman College Art Gallery.

James Monti contributes a large flattened flask-like shape in knotty but well-crafted wood, which he calls "Trunk." Douglas Navarra goes to some trouble to make a box with a molded frame and sides of plexiglass, then fills it with dried peas. Wendy Letven paints a beet and a banana in space and, in "Coexistence," juxtaposes a seed with a flower.

Working on several small canvases, E. E. Smith covers the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, throwing in a few manufactured goods. Given the inclusion of such topical items as a fetus and a condom, the title "Signs of the Times" is appropriate.

The photographer Adam Licht adds a post-Pop twist with two of his color prints of larger-than-life containers — one a sweating soft drink can in rose pink, the other a milk carton that is all metallic sepia.

Mr. Lovell's drawings remain through March 23, "Selections" through March 16. The gallery's number is (718) 960-8732.



"Purple Heart," oilstick and charcoal drawing by Whitfield Lovell, also at Lehman College.