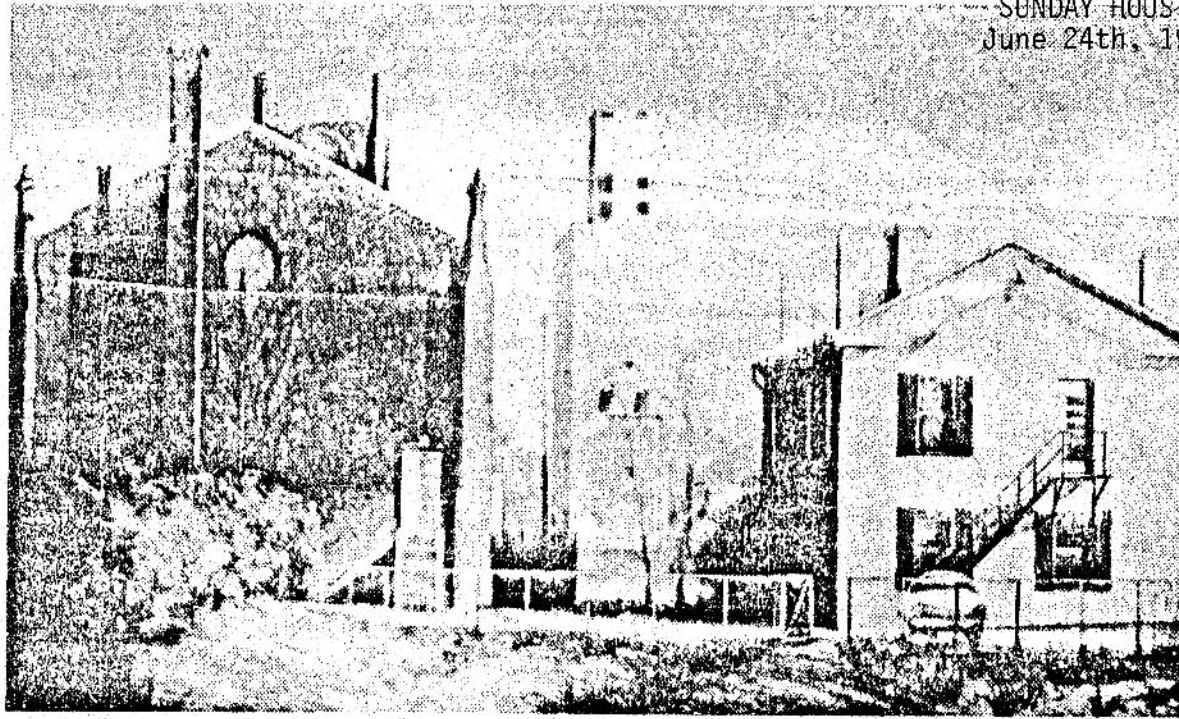


Art

The trite stuff . . .

By PATRICIA C. JOHNSON
Houston Chronicle



Grain Elevator, 1980 etching by Elizabeth Peak at Wilhelm Gallery, is a fine example of pure etching and an image of clarity of form and content.

THE LAND and the city are a primary source of all manner of stimuli. The environment we breathe, see and work in determines many of our traits and goals. For artists, the landscape and the man-made urban spaces offer seemingly inexhaustible subject matter, and in two current exhibits, some 10 artists from across the country deal with them with brushes and paint. Most are trite, however technically accomplished, and all but a handful propose little to enhance our perception of the world or even of the process of art making.

At the Museum of Art of the American West, *Contemporary Western Landscapes* features paintings by James Conway, Chris Burkholder, Ed Mell, Forrest Moses, Earl Staley, Merrill Mahaffey, Tim Saska and Woody Gwynn. Although the surface qualities range from glassy flatness in Gwynn to animated brushwork in Staley and imagery from impressionistic softness in Burkholder to hard-edge geometry in Mell, the general impression is of chromatic and conceptual monotony. Earth tones and sky-blue skies predominate the palettes; Southwest desert scenes and brooks and copses appear as bland, uninspired paintings.

It is surprising, too, that artists like Moses and Staley, who have artistic strength and are known for exciting paintings, are represented by relatively weak works. The exhibit is, in

short, a visual and artistic disappointment. Since the exhibit was conceived on a rotating basis where different works will be presented through the duration, there is hope yet that the next group will offer more satisfaction.

On view through Aug. 10, 1 Houston Center (McKinney at San Jacinto), 650-3936. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, noon-4 p.m. Sunday.

At the new Wilhelm Gallery, the selection presents a number of approaches, including almost photo-realism in the works of C.J. Yao, the expressionistic looseness of Richard Sheehan — one of the most interesting painters in either show — and aerial color photographs by Alexander MacLean.

None is particularly inventive, but the dead-

ening sense of *deja vu* is broken by a group of etchings by Elizabeth Peak. It is not just the difference in technique or the fact that the works are in black and white. Peak, a young artist from Massachusetts, has a fresh point of view of time-worn urban scenes.

The representational images are of freeways, grain elevators and fashionable avenues. Peak has deleted superfluous details to present structure as pure form, solid and spatially convincing, and the grisaille handled to suggest coloration as well as light contrasts. In *Elevated Freeway*, the complex system is transformed into an open composition of lines and blocks that however abstract remains recognizable and lucid. *Grain Elevator* is a fine example of pure etching and an image of clarity of form and content.

Sheehan's oils on canvas have a rich, modu-

lated surface depicting details of such urban sites as tunnels and overpasses. His view is at eye level and up close, focusing on joints where concrete meets earth or vertical supports meld into horizontal beams. Broad brushwork coupled with neutral grays and earth tones make for an abstracted and soft appearance where all but the most elemental visual/structural clues are obliterated. Like Conway (in the MAAW show), Sheehan's canvases resemble underpainting more than completed works. But where Sheehan proffers energy as well as something special in the way of seeing mundaneness, Conway has turned nature's drama — canyons and mountain tops — into a yawn.

On view through June. 5201 Bayard, 526-5628. Hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.