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By Ken Johnson

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Contemplating Childlike Wonder, Long Past Childhood

By KEN JOHNSON

To be a mature adult these days is a daunting assignment. A vast social conspiracy at times seems to be turning many Americans into vulnerable children or narcissistic adolescents. And the world of contemporary art is flooded by work that is either about being young and immature or is deliberately made to look as if it had been created by young and immature people — or both.

"Past Presence: Childhood and Memory," a modest four-artist exhibition at the Altria branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art,

Past Presence

Childhood and Memory
Whitney Museum
of American Art at Altria

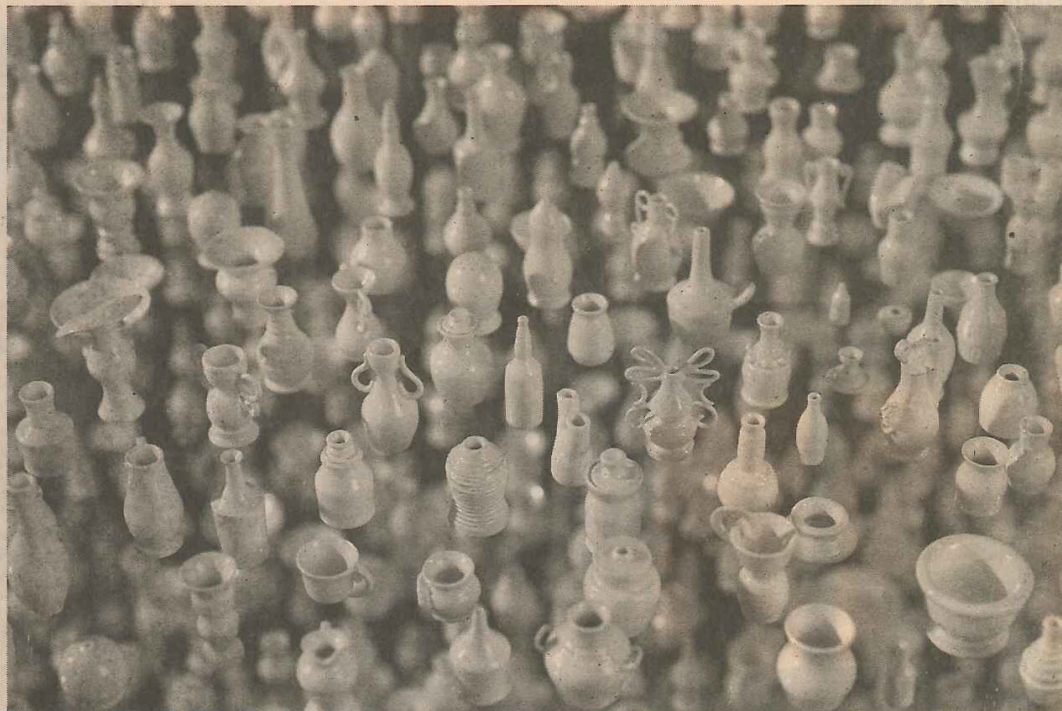
does not get to the bottom of what from some perspectives could seem a sociocultural aberration, nor does it clearly define the role of memory. Nevertheless, the works about juvenile themes — drawn from the Whitney's permanent collection by the museum's curator of drawings, Carter Foster — do play well together.

The exhibition's most impressive piece is Charles LeDray's "Milk and Honey," a freestanding glass cabinet in which 2,000 white, thimble-size glazed ceramic vessels fill six glass shelves. Appealing to the viewer's own childlike sense of wonder, the fields of tiny vases, pitchers, teapots, platters, saltshakers, bowls and many more shapes are marvelously absorbing to study.

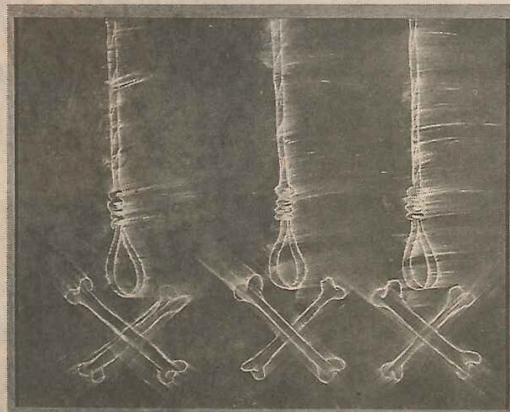
Also by Mr. LeDray is "Clothesline," which is made of 11 pieces of doll-size clothing, each lovingly handmade by the artist and stitched together to make a line of garments hanging vertically on the wall.

Like Mr. LeDray's work, Peggy Preheim's contribution combines miniature scale and fine craftsmanship. The 14 passport-photo-size pencil drawings, in a series titled "Alexandria," look as if they were copied from pictures in a family photo al-

"Past Presence: Childhood and Memory" is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, 120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street, (917) 663-2453, through Oct. 13.



Photographs from Whitney Museum of American Art



Above, a detail of Charles LeDray's "Milk and Honey," and left, Gary Simmons's "Green Chalkboard (Triple X)," both from "Childhood and Memory."

Inside Art

The Inside Art column will resume next Friday.

you can read this as a comment on the history of lynching of African-Americans; and the partial erasure might be a metaphor about how institutionalized education has tended to sanitize the teaching of history.

Mr. Beck's large charcoal drawings are also about the dark side of education. From a book called "The Modern Man's Guide to Life" he has copied instructional illustrations showing where to position a trap for small animals and how to skin a rabbit. In other words, to be educated into manhood is to be initiated into a culture of cruelty and death under the guise of a sporting engagement with nature.

The works by Mr. Beck and Mr. Simmons might be judged too didactic, but in concert with those by Mr. LeDray and Ms. Preheim, they help turn the Whitney Altria's chapel-like gallery into a resonant space for meditating on the lives of inner children.

bum; most are of children, who, as drawn by Ms. Preheim, exude a glowing, preternatural beauty.

Together, Mr. LeDray's and Ms. Preheim's works conjure up a fantasy of childhood as a magic kingdom of innocence and imaginative possibility. But their works also precipitate a certain anxiety and sadness because the viewer knows that the real world does not have a very good record when it comes to protecting children and childhood.

That sense of childhood's exposure to unpleasant realities is evoked in the works of Gary Simmons and Robert Beck. Mr. Simmons makes his point in one of the smeared chalkboard drawings for which he is known. Three hangman's nooses and three sets of crossed bones on a green board look as if they were drawn by a mischievous pupil while the teacher was away.

Knowing that Mr. Simmons's works often deal with racial issues,