

Big Reach by Oakland Gallery

By Kenneth Baker
Chronicle Art Critic

The Oakland Pro Arts Annual (at 1920 Union Street, Oakland, through April 15) always arouses a lot of interest, both because of the organization's high profile and huge membership and because it invites high-powered jurors to select work for the show.

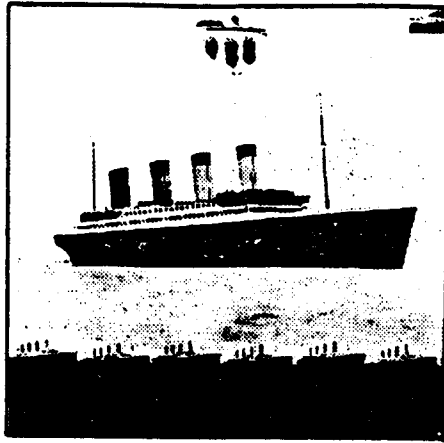
This year the juror was Graham Beal, Chief Curator of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The consensus around town is that Beal's track record at SFMMA has been erratic at best. The current Pro Arts Annual ought not to do his reputation any good.

As always, Pro Arts' installation crew has done its best with the work at hand. And there are a few things here I like. But in general, the work is woefully derivative, pretentious and indifferent, or merely obsessively, made.

In his posthumously published book, *The Chronicle's* late art critic Thomas Albright put his finger on the tendency whose fruits make up too much of the current Annual: "Most of the new painting and sculpture seemed to represent essentially a form of art-school art: the work of artists who have spent too much time looking at surfaces (slides and other reproductions) and immersing themselves in lore about art, and too little time in direct communication with art itself, or with the unprocessed experience of the street or the countryside."

Fortunately, there are exceptions, such as the paintings of Donald Feasel and Patrick LoCicero. Barbara Bell Smith has turned in a painting that is memorably chilling, although it doesn't quite come off.

David Turner and Sono Osato contribute sculptures that make great physical sense and have some mystery about them.



Patrick LoCicero's painting 'Rome' is a highlight of the Oakland show

Surprisingly, one of the most satisfying pieces on view is perhaps the most conceptual in the show: Dawn Fryling's "Nine Marks." The work consists of nine thrift shop coats hung on the wall in a row.

The title proposes that we look at these things formalistically, as nonsignifying figures on the white ground of the wall. This proves to be difficult to do, as the sensuous immediacy of the coats and their literal associations crowd in on one's mind. They become surrogate human figures, and they bring to mind uses of coats by other artists such as Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis and Michelangelo Pistoletto.

Fryling's piece may be as derivative as anything else in the show, but she does not try to hide the fact with stylistic bluster. "Nine Marks" is a very exposed gesture, admirable in its simplicity and its risk of meaninglessness, especially in this context where everyone, including Graham Beal, seems to be straining so hard to mean something by what they've done.

Chicago artist Thomas Skomski be-

longs in the company of post-minimalist sculptors — such as New Yorker Donald Lipski and San Franciscan Nayland Blake — whose work hinges on a keen feeling for the possibilities of prefabricated objects. The first West Coast show of his work is at Pascal de Sarthe Contemporary Art, 315 Sutter Street, through Saturday.

Skomski's work is appealing because of the way the distinct character of each piece makes you feel that he has paid full attention to the materials and decisions in question.

In "Elisabeth's Filter," he has placed a gallon glass bottle of water, sealed with wax, atop a tall wood pedestal that hugs the wall. Behind the bottle sits an "X" of wood dowels. When you look through the eye-level bottle head-on, it distorts the dowels into an infinity symbol. The piece is automatic and enigmatic equally.

"Elisabeth's Filter" recalls H. C. Westermann, who was something of a hero to Chicago artists, both in its use of materials and symbolism and because of its burned-on inscription, which informs us that "70% of the fat free body weight is water."

Skomski likes to work with Masonite pegboard. But he seems to be unaware that expatriate British artist Norman Toynton beat him to a couple of his wall pieces by about 10 years.

A number of Skomski's works, besides "Elisabeth's Filter," depend on light. He makes good use of it in a piece that layers glass between two tiers of large pebbles. The shadows of the pebbles atop the glass are hard to distinguish from the substance of those beneath it.

Skomski's work is pleasing not only because it is carefully contrived. It displays a passionate, unforced intelligence of which we see too little in contemporary art.