



*This compressed charcoal drawing (1980) by William Brice is from an exhibition of his work at Smith Andersen Gallery through April 9.*

## The symbolism of Woman

by Valerie Patten

Many artists use personal symbolism to convey meaning in the visual arts. Essentially non-narrative, this symbolism can be a way for artists to communicate their feelings about life, experience and perception without revealing specific details about incidents or people in their own lives.

The charcoal drawings and oil paintings of William Brice, now on exhibit at the Smith Andersen Gallery in Palo Alto, embody a definite symbolic content. Brice is an expert draftsman who integrates his personal symbolic expressiveness into compositions of great abstract beauty.

Brice's drawings often look like sketches of sculptures. He juxtaposes three-dimensional forms on a white field with more linear, two-dimensional shapes. His drawing manifests a total control of gesture and composition.

There is a primitive look to Brice's work, as in Picasso's work. This is a sophisticated primitivism, however—one that deals with archetypal sexual imagery in a disciplined and intellectual way. Brice is a collector of primitive sculpture; his work is a modern distillation of primitive form and symbolism.

Brice's use of symbol basically involves a kind of homage to female sexuality, the image of Mother, the womb. Sculptural forms that refer to the figure and parts of the figure are often rendered beside architectural forms.

At times, the human forms take on an architectural quality as well. Hips, legs and torso are arranged compositionally so that they become like columns, pedestals and arches. This reference to classical antique architecture lends a monumentality to the forms, making the reference to

female sexuality powerful, and simple.

The feeling that comes through this use of symbolic content is abstracted to a level of worship or contemplation of female forms, of female sexual identity in general. It refers not to a particular woman, but to Woman in concept.

\* \* \*  
Robert Bagnasco Murray, a younger artist showing at the DeSaisset Museum at the University of Santa Clara, also deals with primitivism in a formal, intellectual manner. Murray's conceptual sculptures, made of cast-off parts of used objects, employ complicated, part-humorous, part-serious personal symbolic content which might be totally unfathomable to the viewer, were his personal statement at the exhibit less clear.

\* \* \*  
Katherine Bazak, presently showing at the Gallery House in Palo Alto, pursues a mild symbolic concern within the more traditional framework of figure paintings in oils. Her figures, always female, are located in rooms that are quiet and empty but for a few objects. These objects, such as a mirror on the floor, a conch shell, a surrealistic curtain over a window full of light, take on a symbolic character and create an element of mystery in the otherwise subdued interiors.

Bazak's beautifully painted studies are thoughtful and controlled. She does attempt to intrigue the viewer by her use of symbolic objects; however, I think that it is a mistake. In Bazak's case, the symbolism is too common to really intrigue. The simplicity and stillness of these interiors with figures does not really need the embellishment of some hint of content, particularly since it is not pursued or presented with any real personal necessity. [E]