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Absorbing, Amping, Beaming

By April Kingsley

Despite the common misapprehension to the contrary, one of a critic's rarest roles is that of prophet. It happened inadvertently to me recently when, just days after my plea for high-quality public sculpture in the city appeared in the *Voice*, one was erected on the Grand Army Plaza at 60th Street and Fifth Avenue. The fact that it is by **RONALD BLADEN** (the scarcity of whose work I had most deplored), and that it is a temporary, get-acquainted, yet full-scale proposal for the site (which I also advocated), only increased my amazement at my perspicacity. The piece, *Kama Sutra*, is one of three Bladens on view around the city this month—one south of exit 10 on the Bronx River Parkway, and the other, *The Rockers*, 1965, in the courtyard of the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers. (This museum organized the project in conjunction with the Public Art Council and the parks departments of Westchester and Manhattan.)

Kama Sutra was planned for its site. Echoing the flowing lines of a nearby equestrian monument, it draws your eye along planes that point like a cannon to the skyscrapers beyond. It looks like a building, so you search its sides for an entrance, finding none, yet it is clearly a sculpted object with identifiable front, back, and sides, black and white coloration, and energetic thrusts and counterthrusts that seem organically related to nature, visible in the park behind. It absorbs energy from nature and the man-made all around it, then amps that energy up within its impasse walls before beaming it out into the city below. The white wedge so aggressively inserted in the larger black hulk implies the sexual metaphor suggested by the title, but in no way mitigates the impression of grandeur and high seriousness generated by the weighty, massive form.

Bladen always allows a certain amount of romantic expressiveness, even irrationality, in his work, while carefully adjusting proportion and detail to give the work monumentality. His background in poetry and painting prior to making sculpture in the early '60s has always served to separate him from bland Minimalism. Inside the obdurately thick skins of his pieces is a jungle of wooden struts and bracings, (which he builds in sections in his studio for assembly on the site) that resembles one of Piranesi's prisons. Something of the rugged power of the inside inevitably comes through the plywood skin—his pieces feel strong and solid, not hollow nor vacuous the way so many other Minimal sculpture's seem. The city would do well to acquire this piece in a permanent material for this site: it's one of Bladen's best.

Interestingly, *Kama Sutra* bears a resemblance to an 18th century astronomical observatory in Jaipur, India, which is

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included in Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects*, a book that has served as a bible to many younger sculptors. While the similarity is probably coincidental for Bladen, the similarity between **ALICE AYCOCK's** *Project Entitled Studies for a Town*, at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street (to February 6) and Rudofsky's photographs of Egyptian shanty towns is real. Aycock readily admits the source of her inspiration, but it's not the only source. Her MOMA Project, a 12 feet in diameter wooden construction, like a honeycombed cylinder cut on a slant from 3 feet high in front to 10 feet high at the rear, also has affinities with medieval walled towns, old engravings of ancient, high-walled mazes, and ruined Transylvanian castles. The vertiginous stairways, dark passages, and secret rooms of a castle are, in fact, most like the piece's internal structure, to which we are, unfortunately, only allowed limited visual access. Ideally, an Aycock work should be experienced by both mind and body since you need to submit physically to her spaces to feel the psychological pressures and poetic ramification she intends. But if you give your imagination full rein to wander through this piece and the other completed and projected pieces on view in drawing and photograph form, you will come away with a good, if not wholly satisfied, concept of this fascinating young artist.

ANDREW JANSONS hasn't shown individually in four years, so his exhibition of large, painterly abstractions at the Max Hutchinson Gallery, 138 Greene Street (to January 29) permits you to follow his shift from soft-focus, illusionistically depicted color clouds to tough, aggressively brushed images that assert their right to be pure paint on canvas. Unafraid of strong light/dark contrasts or deeply saturated hues, Jansons is one of our gutsiest young abstractionists. He infuses early '70s lyricism with emotional intensity and nervous tension without sacrificing his personal bi- or tri-partite structure or his innate sensitivity to nuance. There is a wide emotional range in this work, from the pristine, Vermeer-like, tenderness of *Pearl River* to the fevered heat of *Night Vision* and *Crucible* or the Rembrandtesque somberness of *Shoal* or *Forecast*, his most recent painting. He is a true descendant of Abstract Expressionism's open, reciprocal approach to the painting process; as you view the painting you relive his struggle to pull contending painterly forces into a precarious harmony.