

Art People

Douglas C. McGill

Ellery Kurtz paintings will orbit Earth.

IMAGINE an artist at his easel, sinking in a foot of dust, painting a picture of the earth from the moon. Or on a tether attached to the space shuttle, sketching the sunrise from his floating vantage point. Or drawing a nude, perhaps, in the warmth of a spaceship hurtling toward a galaxy far, far away.

Such thoughts have passed through the minds of Ellery Kurtz and Howard Wishnow, an artist and a psychologist, respectively, whose science fiction fantasies will be partly realized next month during a five-day mission of the space shuttle Columbia.

Aboard that shuttle will be four paintings by Mr. Kurtz, who is sending them up to see how pigments and paintings stand up under zero gravity and other conditions in space. While this may seem a modest start toward full-fledged dreams of making art in space, Mr. Kurtz says the experiment should provide information that will make more complex activity possible.

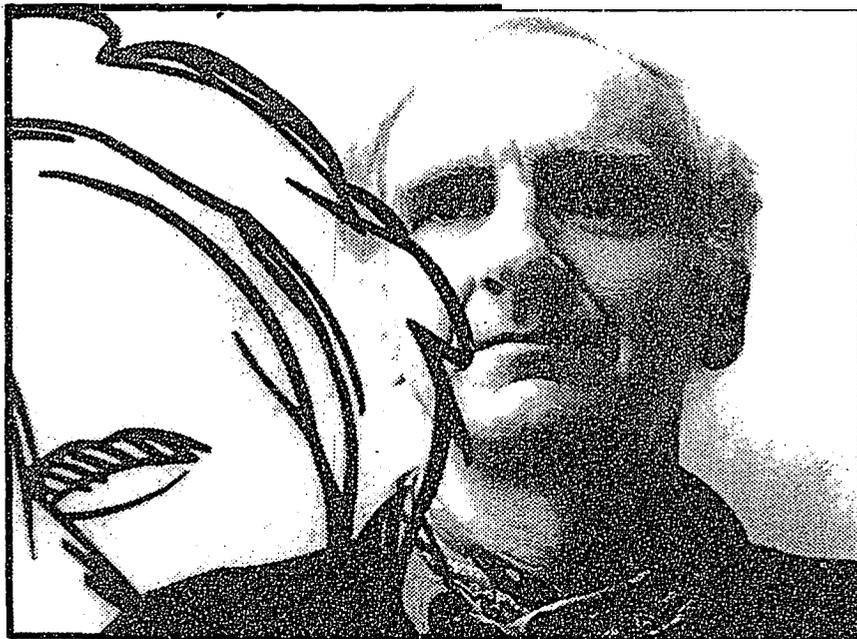
Besides, he adds, the guidelines of NASA imposed strict conditions on the experiment. Under the space agency's "Get Away Special" program, objects may be sent into space in canisters of various sizes and at various costs. Mr. Kurtz and his partner chose a 2½-cubic-foot canister, which will cost them \$3,000 for the five-day trip. Despite the canister, the paintings will experience zero gravity, extreme G-forces at takeoff and temperature variations in the shuttle's cargo bay.

Mr. Kurtz's paintings are semi-abstract, oil-on-linen works designed after walls covered with advertising posters.

The idea for the experiment, Mr. Kurtz said, came during a conversation with his friend Mr. Wishnow when the shuttle program began years ago.

"We wondered whether man could actually take paintings into space with him, safely, on future voyages," Mr. Kurtz said. "My friend, being a psychologist, was also interested in what it would be like, in deep space travel, not to have any art, nothing to look at that was esthetically pleasing."

"All artists are concerned with per-



The New York Times/Chester Higgins Jr.

Tom Wesselmann with one of his steel sculptures, which are being shown at the Janis Gallery, 110 West 57th Street.

manence," he added. "That's part of what the experiment is about, whether my paintings can withstand that kind of stress."

The symbolism of the trip was also important, he added.

"Where man goes," he said, "art should go."

Tom Wesselmann In a New Medium.

"I've just had the best year of my life," Tom Wesselmann said the other day. "I always work in a kind of near ecstasy, anyway, but there's really been something about the new work that grabbed me."

Followers of Pop Art will remember Mr. Wesselmann as one of its high practitioners, especially for his gleaming, glamorous nudes and for his collages made from such things as refrigerator doors and Coca-Cola billboards.

Well, Mr. Wesselmann is back, and so are his nudes, but this time in a different form. The new pieces — brightly colored works made from cut-out aluminum sheets, as well as wall sculptures made from thin pieces of steel cut out with laser beams — are at the Janis Gallery, 110 West 57th Street, through Dec. 14 (review on page C26).

These hybrid works — half painting, half sculpture — look like nothing Mr. Wesselmann has done before. Yet, the artist points out, careful observers of his 1983 show of painted cutouts at the Janis Gallery will have noticed the thin steel lines that projected off the cutouts. In the current

show, the thin steel lines have become the entire work.

The artist is keeping mum about technological details, but the reason the new works look so much like drawings is that a computer program allows him to base them upon actual sketches and doodles. "I do dozens of tiny little sketches until one happens spontaneously that has the right feel to it," Mr. Wesselmann explains.

Thus, the artist captures the freshness and spontaneity of a doodle in the permanence of steel. "I don't like technology," Mr. Wesselmann explains. "The laser pieces didn't come from an interest in lasers or computers, but from an idea — to make drawings in steel. I never miss a chance to run a computer down. But I'm sure glad we've got them, because they're helping me a lot right now."

Works by Siah Armajani At Max Protetch Gallery

Siah Armajani was one of the two artists who helped design the Battery Park City Plaza, and his work — or at least his strong influence in the highly collaborative project — will be seen on a grand scale when the plaza is completed in the fall of 1988.

For anyone eager to see work by Mr. Armajani without having to wait three years, the present moment is ideal. In New York, there is a show of his recent sculpture at the Max Protetch Gallery, 37 West 57th Street (through Nov. 30). And in Philadelphia, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, at 34th and Walnut Streets, there is a major retrospective of his work (through Dec. 1).

Many of Mr. Armajani's sculptures are a part of what he calls his "Dictionary for Building," which he has been creating since 1974. Its individual parts are sculptures, usually made of wood, glass and other common construction materials, each of which portrays elements of everyday American architecture, but in a slightly skewed form.

At the Protetch Gallery, for example, are five pieces with names like "Closet Under Stairs" and "Closet Under Landing," while at the Philadelphia show are displayed pieces like "Dictionary Stand Off the Floor" and "Back Porch with Picnic Table."

"The idea," explains Mr. Armajani, "is to index all possible combinations of all architectural elements, physically, perceptually, metaphorically, experientially."

The slightly skewed aspect of the sculptures is where the art comes in.

"First I look at the whole thing, then I dissect them into different parts," he said. "Then I put them back together, but not quite. The pieces maintain their independence. In 'Closet Under Stairs,' the top of the closet does not dissolve into the stairs."

"When you stand in front of it," he said, "your memory, your previous experience brings them back together."