

ART REVIEW; Seeing Messages, Some Subtle, in a Door

By WILLIAM ZIMMER
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THE obvious approach to an entire exhibition about doors might be to fill it with rectangular objects. But "Doors: Image and Metaphor in Contemporary Art," now at the New Jersey Center for the Visual Arts, has sidestepped the obvious and opted instead for nuance.

The curators, Nancy Cohen and Alice Dillon, did include some close-to-literal doors among their wide-ranging choices.

Chief among these are two by Burhan Dogancay, who was born in Turkey and who demonstrates the enthusiasm of an adopted New Yorker. Mr. Dogancay is captivated by some of city's most forgettable objects.

His graffiti-laden "Liz Lives Here" (1994) is a faithful reproduction of an actual door he spied on a walk through the city. His other work in the show, "Vintage Door" (1994), is a more minimal example on which locking mechanisms are emphasized.

Sean Scully has a worldwide reputation for his stripe paintings, which he manages to make lush and romantic through rich color and sometimes by inserting panels of different stripes into the major field of a painting. The panels might seem like doors onto a different experience. In this exhibition, Mr. Scully lets viewers in on what inspires him in terms of structure and color through the use of photographs he took in Portugal in 1998 of highly decorated building facades with prominent doors and windows.

Viewers can pass through a door in Robert Fischer's untitled mixed-media installation, resembling a narrow dwelling, made this year. Mr. Fischer decided to provide no big surprise for those who climb the two steps and enter the space. They meet cardboard cartons and a wooden chair that looks as though it had climbed the wall.

In a nine-minute DVD presentation, "Revolving Door" (2001), Carola Dertnig focuses on the sometimes cumbersome process of navigating such a door. One segment illustrates that large paintings have an especially awkward time.

Among the metaphorical doors, those whose function is not clear or are clearly symbolic are Ellen Brooks's large color photographs from 1998 and 1999. These intriguing makeshift structures most resemble a fort that a child might build from whatever is at hand.

Carol K. Brown, in "Domestic Architecture" (2000), provides a working door, but it is only a few inches high and is hung on the wall along with several windows. The domestic part of the title becomes clear when one reads the words printed on the various components. The door, for example, opens on the trite but harsh phrase, "You Can't Do Anything Right." The conflict is furthered by phrases in the windows.

Siah Armajani, who is interested in open versus closed spaces, also deals in miniatures. Elegant portals made of bronze that open onto formless space are paired with more mundane aluminum objects. In "City Center No. 1" it is tiny shopping carts, and in "City Center No. 7" several rollaway beds, which conjure up specific situations.

Among the most mysterious works in the show are the two paintings by Carlos Vega. What first seem like straightforward depictions of doors are covered with elegant script. In the case of "A Legal Case," it is the prose of a contract written in Spanish, and the painting takes on a disquieting aura. It is narrow, mostly red, and the steep stairs leading to the door might induce vertigo.