In New Jersey, Nature in Abstract and a Prison Cell

By HOLLAND COTTER

Summer is the traditional down time for the art world, but New Jersey museums are offering some surprisingly intense shows. They include a retrospective of visionary paintings by a reclusive American artist, a multimedia storefront installation on family ties by one of our most impressive Puerto Rican artists and an intergenerational homage to a firebrand political leader whom many people consider a martyr.

Montclair

Anyone lucky enough to have caught the "Spiritual in Art" exhibition in Los Angeles in 1987 may remember an odd, luminous semi-abstract painting by Agnes Pelton (1881-1961). Titled "White Fire," it suggested stars or eyes glowing from beneath a thin stream of falling water. It was the only work by Pelton in the show (there were six by her near-contemporary Georgia O'Keeffe, and few have been exhibited).

"Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature," organized by Michael Zakian of the Palm Springs Desert Museum and now at the MONTCLAIR ART MUSEUM, helps correct this oversight with a selection of 50 works spanning the artist's career. Pelton came to painting early and was successful enough to be included in the Armory Show of 1913. Professionally, it was a big moment for her and she never got over it.

She often seemed to be on the run from career-enhancing opportunities. She moved a lot, from New York to New Mexico to Hawaii to Europe to the Southern California desert, where she spent her last years. Her output was jarring and uneven, peppered with broadening, enlarging portraits of local gentrification and unremarkable landscapes.

Perhaps most important, her approach to art was fundamentally out of sync with dominant American trends. A theosophist with an abiding interest in all varieties of occult thought, she viewed art as a psychosymbolic channeling of natural energies, an approach exemplified by the Theosophical Society's "Living Paintings Group" in Taos, N.M., in the 1930's, artists with whom she felt deep affinities.

Pelton's abstract works make up the greater part of the Montclair show, and they turn a wealth of influences — O'Keeffe, Joseph Stella, Kandinsky, Art Deco, Asian mandala, Etruscan — into a distinctive synthesis. Pelton's depiction and atmospheric effects give nature a surreal cast, and her closely brushed surfaces and graded colors have an authentic Luminist glow. Despite the erratic course her art took, her best work places her in an eclectic company of surrealist painters and esotericists.

Newark

Another community-oriented work, "Badge of Honor" by Pepón Osorio, is the outstanding offering of the NEWARK MUSEUM (in collaboration with a local contemporary art center called ALJIRA), though it is actually installed in a storefront in a working-class Hispanic neighborhood about half a mile north of the museum
tself.

Mr. Osorio, who is 40 and was born in Puerto Rico, is a familiar figure in New York. One of his first gallery exhibitions was at Delirium, a show of drawings by persecuted Puerto Rican artists that included paintings by Diego Rivera and Leopoldo Méndez, among the most memorable shows of that season.

His Newark installation is divided into two sections, one a bare prison cell blocked off by metal bars, the other a fantasy version of an adolescent male bedroom, the walls padded with baseball cards and Bruce Lee posters, a huge bank of audio hardware stacked in the corner, and furniture stuffed with gilded clenched fists.

In both room and cell, the occupant of the lives. Ms. Fine's mixed-media collage, a group show that brings together artists politically active in the 1960's and 70's with younger colleagues who are in many ways their inheritors, has given Alzibizu a new role as champion of abstract human forms. In general, she is at her best when she is most intimate. In a large show of "Archetypes," the forms look overscaled and cartoonish, while the smaller "Four Elements," with its relief forms and carved inscriptions, has the kind of mystery she seems to be after.

Jersey City

A revered political figure of more recent date is celebrated at the JERSEY CITY MUSEUM, Pedro Alzibizu Campos (1881-1965), a Harvard-educated lawyer born in Ponce, who was a charismatic figure in the Puerto Rican independence movement, first as leader of the Nationalist Party and later, having been repeatedly charged with conspiracy, as an inmate in United States prisons, where he spent much of his adult life.

The 30th anniversary of his death is the occasion for "Alzibizu Vive!" a group show that brings together artists politically active in the 1960's and 70's with younger colleagues who are in many ways their inheritors. Alzibizu has become an iconic, near-ideal symbol of the political differences shows up subtly in the work. The woodcut posters of Antonio Martorell, Rupert Garcia, Lorenzo Homar and Mario Carreño Martínez, all of whose works are on display at the museum, and it is well worth the time spent to see his brilliant assemblage artist's hand at work.

On view in the museum itself is the work of the abstract painter William T. Williams. His hard-edged abstract paintings from 1970, with their crisp, linear forms, have been in the museum's permanent collection since 1978, and his metallic colors, have terrific formal panache and are attractively paired with more recent work.

The thick, textured surfaces of paintings from the 1980's represent a formal departure for the artist and a shift to a new, more personal context. The wall texts reveal that the rich, smoky cobalt and blues shot through with reds and yellows are based on visual memories from childhood and refer to the spirituality of a Southern upbringing.

Spirituality is the very essence of "Josefa: Religiones del Sur," a reinterpretation of part of the museum's renowned Asian holdings. Among the works are doll-size shamans, figures of men riding mythic, mystical beasts, a painting of a divine bat-like guardian figure with webbed wings. The exhibition, which is accompanied by a catalog, runs through June 30.

Marina Gutiérrez's poetic assemblages present Alzibizu as a steel-mesh scuplture filled with cutout metal flowers. In Gloria Rodriguez's paintings, he is little more than a cloud of clouds, and in Orlando Cuevas's "Don Pedro's House," his political ideas are ingeniously brought to life. Mr. Cuevas's model is a miniature of the size of a Victorian dollhouse, and through each window one glimpses a tableau — a battle scene, a soldier in a chair, a figure of the artist surrounded by nudes — illustrating the alibis Alzibizu deployed and the solutions he proposed.

Like Alzibizu, Lolita Lebrón was a nationalist revolutionary with roots in radical Roman Catholicism. She participated in an attack on the United States Capitol building in 1954 and was shot dead in 1955. Her presence is evoked in an understated room-size installation by Lillian Murolo, which adorns "Alzibizu Lives!" The objects that make up Ms. Murolo's spare, succinct portfolio include a copy of the uniformlike beret worn by Ms. Lebrón at the time of her arrest, a vitrine holding a gun and a New Testament, and a weathered wooden wall bracket piled with nail clippings — relics, it would seem, of her years in prison.

The museum's third show, "Joan Fine: Wall Reliefs," steers away from the usual media works, often monumental in size, featuring carved and molded organic forms resembling animal, plant and abstract human forms. In general, she is at her best when she is most intimate. In a large show of "Archetypes," the forms look overscaled and cartoonish, while the smaller "Four Elements," with its relief forms and carved inscriptions, has the kind of mystery she seems to be after.

"Even Song" (1934), by Agnes Pelton, on view in Montclair.

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