

# 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.

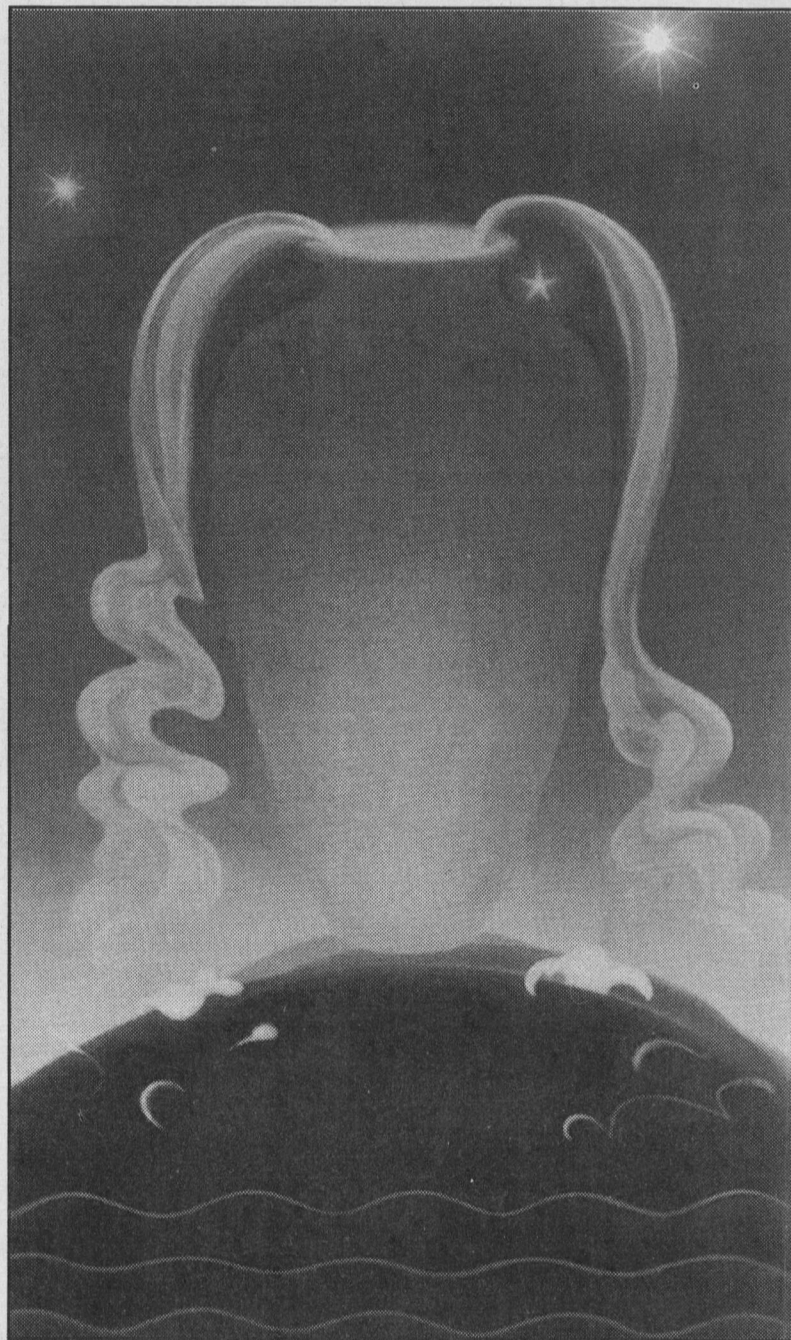
## Montclair

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 since.

"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 another.

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 jarringly uneven, peppered with bread-earning portraits of local gentry 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 Transcendental Painting Group in Taos, N.M., in the 1930's, artists with



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

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 mandalas — into a distinctive synthesis. Pelton's depiction

and atmospheric effects gives nature an extraterrestrial 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 the eclectic company of the Luminists and ecstatics.

Also worth catching in Montclair is a small show by the Brooklyn artist Elizabeth Berdann. Her six oil-on-copper portraits of elderly women are solidly Photo Realist in approach (her own minutely detailed self-portraits were included in last year's "Bad Girls" show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo) and straightforwardly address the interrelated themes of age, beauty and morality. And the fact that the women depicted are all residents of a nursing home a few blocks from the museum turns Ms. Berdann's paintings into a poignant community-art project.

## 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 itself.

Mr. Osorio, who is 40 and was born in Puerto Rico, is a familiar figure in New York. One of his lavish, gallery-filling assemblages was a high point of the 1993 Whitney Biennial and his 1991 retrospective at El Museo del Barrio, an expressively textured, theatrical meditation on Hispanic life and culture, was among the 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 papered with baseball cards and Bruce Lee posters, a huge bank of audio hardware stacked in the corner, and furniture studded with gilded clenched fists.

In both room and cell, the occupants appear on video monitors — a middle-aged father in prison, his teen-age son at home — talking as if between the walls and unfolding the story of their lives. Questioning, reminiscing, rebuking, their words are as aggressive and self-protective as the material accumulation of the boy's room, though underneath them runs a profound sense of tenderness and loss. It takes only a few minutes to find Mr. Osorio's installation, and it is well worth the time spent to see his

brilliant assemblage'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 diagonal forms, matte surfaces and metallic colors, have terrific formal panache and are attractively paired with more recent work.

The thick, fissured surfaces of paintings from the 1990's represent a formal departure for the artist and mark a shift to a new, more personal content. The wall texts reveal that the rich, smoky cobalts and browns 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 "Korea: Religions and Traditions," a reinstallation of part of the museum's renowned Asian holdings. Among the works are doll-size shamanist figures of men riding mythical beasts, a painting of a divine batlike guardian figure with webbed wings bristling from his face, and a gravely smiling portrait of the teacher and monk Sosandung (1520-1602), who led the resistance against the Japanese occupation of Korea in the late 16th century.

## Jersey City

A revered political figure of more recent date is celebrated at the **JERSEY CITY MUSEUM**. Pedro Albizu Campos (1881-1965), a Harvard-educated lawyer born in Ponce, was a charismatic figure in the Puerto Rican independence movement, first as a 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 "Albizu Vive/Albizu Lives," 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 direct heirs and for whom Albizu has become an iconic, near-mythical symbol.

The generational differences shows up subtly in the work. The woodcut posters of Antonio Martorell, Rupert García, Lorenzo Homar and José R. Alicea of a quarter-century ago are in exhortative Social

Realist style, with Albizu's reiterated signature image — the black bow tie, the dark, tense mustachioed face — as clear and readable as a political slogan.

In a densely brushed painting by Juan Sánchez, born in 1954, the didactic message remains strong but the language has changed, encompassing a broad cultural history. Albizu's face is accompanied by an emblematic hand and heart and surrounded by the spiraling pictographic forms of the Taino people, Puerto Rico's indigenous pre-Conquest inhabitants.

Marina Gutierrez's poetic assemblage presents Albizu as a steel-mesh figure filled with cutout metal flowers. In Gloria Rodriguez's paintings, he is little more than a cloud of light, and in Orlando Cuevas's "Don Pedro's House," his political ideas are ingeniously brought to life. Mr. Cuevas's model tenement is about the size of a Victorian doll house, and through each window one glimpses a tableau — a battalion of soldiers, a skeleton in a chair, a figure of the Virgin surrounded by nails — illustrating the realities Albizu deplored and the solutions he proposed.

Like Albizu, 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 jailed for 25 years. Her presence is evoked in an understated room-size installation by Lillian Mulero, which adjoins "Albizu Lives."

The objects that make up Ms. Mulero's spare, succinct portrait include a copy of the uniformlike beige suit worn by Ms. Lebrón at the time of her arrest, a vitrine holding a gun and a New Testament, and a weatherworn 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 politics. Ms. Fine's mixed-media works, often monumental in size, feature carved and molded organic forms resembling animal fossils, vegetation and abstract human forms. In general, she is at her best when she is most intimate. In a large piece like "Archetypes," the forms look overscaled and cartoonish, while the smaller "Four Elements," with its reliefs of curves and furled forms, has the kind of mystery she seems to be after.