

ART

# The Potato Takes Center Stage at Pace University's Gallery

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

**N**OW, between winter and spring, is a good time to commemorate the potato, whose color and contour matches the landscape. The artists Gerard Renaldi and Shiela Zelsermyer have gone further. They see the potato as nothing less than the carrier of civilization. With literally a ton of help from the Maine Potato Commission they have turned the Gallery at the Pace University campus in Briarcliff Manor into a lumpy meditation on humanity and society.

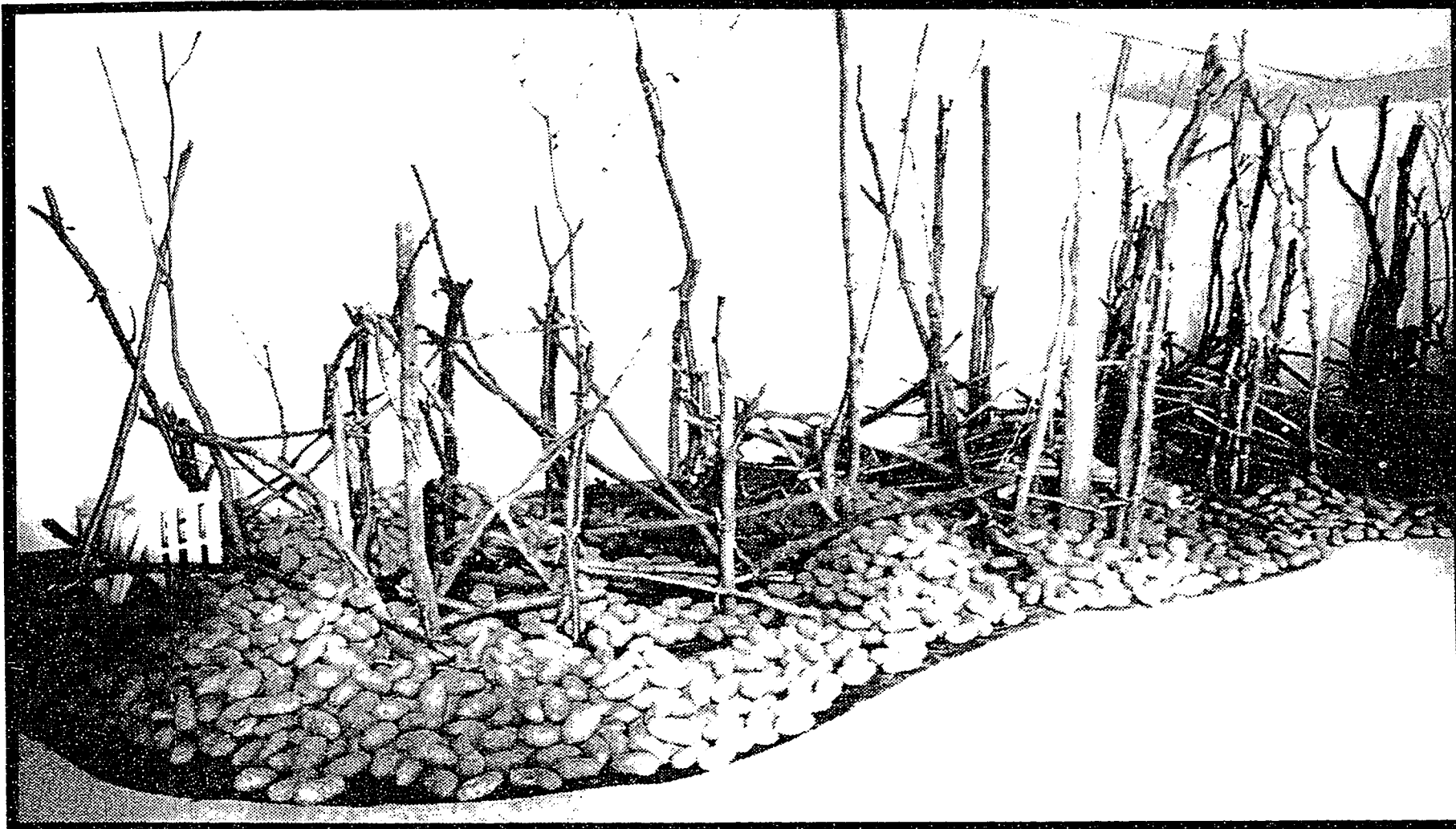
There are two major sculptural installations plus additions that deepen the experience. The first, in a darkened room, is a forest of saplings and a ground cover of potatoes. The artists made a recording of potatoes spilling from their cartons to use as a sound track. This sound, appropriately, resembles primordial grunts.

We are bidden not necessarily to see the second sunlit and well-ordered installation as progress from the amorphousness of the first, but as an alternative to it. The potatoes are in cells made from slats of crates of cheese (another food staple). They are seemingly classified or specialized but also seem to be in prison.

The rest of the exhibition is a kind of potato rhapsody. Pastel drawings of potatoes make them look like blood cells and drawn grids of potatoes look like abacuses or board games. There are potatoes, variously rock-hard and mushy, that date from a year ago when the artists began their project, and potatoes that are sprouting horns resembling spiked crabs. Other sculptures are made from cheese-crate slats and saplings.

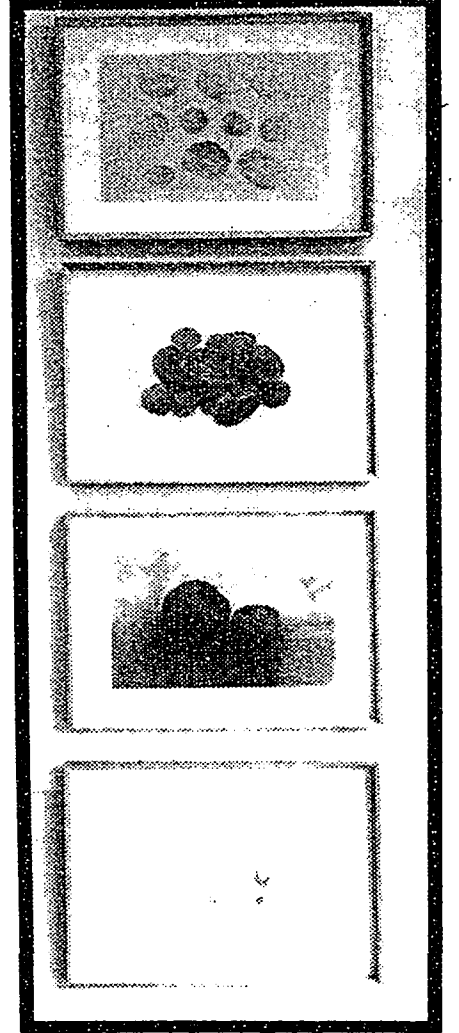
Finally, two cloth sheets hung on the wall featuring no firm imagery might emblemize the unknown future. However, in their wrinkles it is not hard to see the outline of potatoes. This whole enterprise runs on vibrations: there are no words to shape the viewer's experience and often the artists anticipated one another's moves and discoveries without expressed communication. This piece transcends the potato and becomes a celebration of the potency of collaboration — between Mr. Renaldi and Mrs. Zelsermyer but also between the artists and viewers predisposed to unguided exploration. (Through April 4).

A whole raft of words is at the Bronx Museum of the Arts through March 26. When artists join words



The New York Times / Joyce Dopken

A forest of saplings and a ground cover of potatoes, above, and pastel drawings of potatoes at Pace



and pictures nowadays it is usually for the telling of pungent narratives, rather than to further arcane philosophy, as in the conceptualist 1970's.

The word-and-picture genre can camouflage: writing may at least give one a handle on lackluster or obscure art, or an arresting image may make us overlook the artist's defects as a prose writer. However this exhibition organized by Philip Verre, the museum curator, has some genuinely provocative pockets.

Many of the best works form a genuine dichotomy between the pictures and the words. Each component is like a pole, and a fresh current flows between them. Duane Michaels tells an affecting, really rather weepy tale about his childhood in Pitts-

burgh. But the several accompanying photographs that Mr. Michaels took on a visit there in 1982 capture a confidant city with a bright metallic ring.

Artists whose work features an effective juxtaposition of words and pictures include Roger Anthony, who can include innocuous prose such as recipes for salad on an ornate page inspired no doubt by a medieval breviary, and Bernard Maisner, who purveys aphorisms from R. B. Laing, Charlie Parker and Franz Kafka in a similarly elaborate field in which gold leaf is prominent. Robert Petersen specializes in a unique kind of day book. For each month he arranges a collage of ephemera whose relevance is doubtless known to him. But he also has a date stamp and stamps each

date of the month somewhere on his composition. This monitoring device works to prod the hermetic imagery into life.

Dotty Attie is an artist of few words, but her assiduousness is great, and her illustrative skills are superb — she makes colored pencils resemble some curly liquid medium — so that we are anxious to get drawn into her story, which is like an eroticized boys adventure. By comparison the parables of Ida Applebroog, recounted on her unique placards of rhexopex on vellum, seem not only physically but also intellectually, brittle. A coil of tangled pencil marks oddly becomes a poignant emblem for Arakawa's reverie on the death of Oyvind Fahlstrom. Arakawa singles

out Fahlstrom's "hideous opacity," against the "grand transparency" of artists such as Duchamp and De Chirico.

But other one-on-one match-ups of words and pictures by artists of note, Roger Brown and Vernon Fisher, fall below their usual quality. Words and imagery actually conspire against each other in work by Doris Lanier. Her tale "Vixen" is told in pretty calligraphy and her painting is rendered in the primitive gesturalism of neo-expressionism, but there is little beyond the surface of either component. Juan Sanchez's stoganeering and collage headlines about freedom for Puerto Rico seem but a nuisance when compared with the segment of his painting that is a rectangle of blue

sky and mountains populated by a vibrant dove.

A thorough perusal of this exhibition seems like a trip to a museum and library combined. Others included in the bibliography are Judy Blum, Victor Burgin, Amalia Hoffman, Mimi Smith and Zush.

In the Bronx Museum's Jerry Clifford Community Gallery, the artist known only as Jeff has arrayed sculptures and drawings that one hopes are truly conceptual and not about to become actualities. The exhibition consists of plans and models for his coffin and the coffins of other art world notables. The schemes range from witty to mordant. Yet one is thoroughly impressed by Jeff's brave thinking on the subject, when most of us can't even face the prospect of writing a will (Through March 19).

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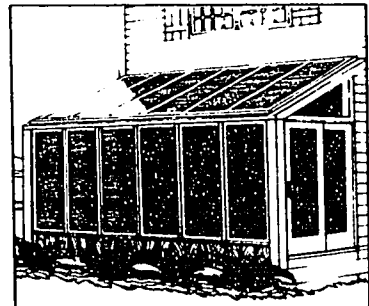


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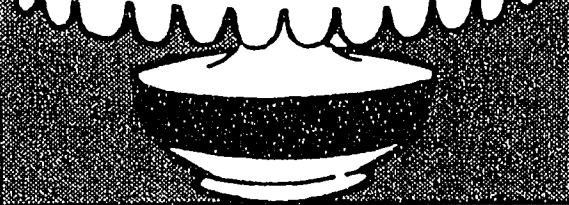
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