

'10 Major Women Artists' in West Nyack

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

A VISITOR to the Rockland Center for the Arts in West Nyack these days is in for a surprise and a jolt. "Images of Power," subtitled "Visual Statements by 10 Major Women Artists," is an exhibition well-tempered for the era we live in.

The art isn't soft, it isn't pink or round — the clichéd adjectives that used to be applied to feminist art that identified itself as such. Much of the work here might have been made by either sex, but the aggregate of 10 female artists who work without frills, often dealing in politics — and not just sexual politics — makes a strong, bracing statement.

Driving up to the center, one comes upon the enormous "Web," a dense photocollage of images on canvas by Cristina Biaggi. The piece is cut up like a web and the image of a naked woman is at the center, as if she's the inveigling spider. But from the imagery on the other sections, mostly of mass political demonstrations, one sees that human existence is more dense and complex than merely being trapped by women. And a double

reading is possible: the clear, powerful image of a woman (she is depicted as shining) might be a kind of repose after one negotiates the complications put up by the world.

Inside the gallery, one is met by a reprise of a natural phenomenon. Betsy Damon has made it her project to cast in paper pulp a dry riverbed in Utah. A large swath of this unwieldy but heroic piece trails down the wall and then courses over part of the gallery floor. There are many round and deep niches where large rocks were, and Ms. Damon has imported some

ART

heavy stones to give variety to her piece. Hers is one of those adventure-some works that might seem addle-brained — after all why replicate a river? — but one doesn't miss the political force of the title, "A Memory of Clean Water."

Christy Rupp has a dual way with animals: she lets the animals such as rats, pigeons and fish that she has sculptured over the years be their downtrodden and endangered selves and has also let them serve as metaphors and models for the human pre-

dicament. "Dog Eat Dog" is a rhythmic, painted-steel sculpture of one fish swallowing another, and "Hometown Hunger" is a worm feasting on an ear of corn. With Ms. Rupp, the basic phenomena revealed by a study of biology are like an aperture on whatever possible situations life presents.

A similar kind of basic element is held up by the veteran artist Nancy Spero, who has exploited the rubber stamp as a way of repeating images across a frieze. Her chief image here is both winsome and fearsome — the Celtic fertility goddess Sheela-na-gig, who seems nothing but affable as she holds open her large genital orifice through which, one supposes, she might be capable of giving birth to the whole world. As counterpoint are images of more alluring, but not as blatantly sexual, women. Betty Grable is specifically featured, and the movie star contrasting with the primitive image makes a friction that sticks indelibly in the mind.

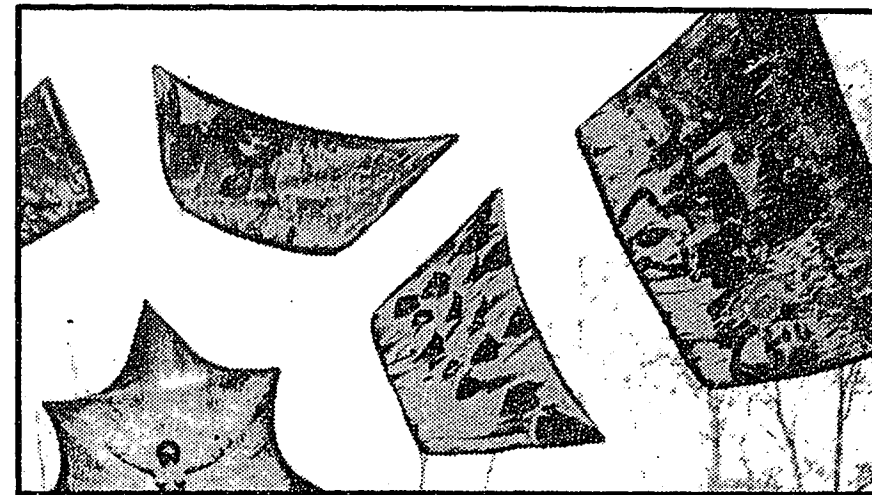
The mixed-media work (raffia straw and mirrors as well as collaged newspaper headlines and images and bright colors are prominent) by the artist known only as Catti has the requisite fetish look that lets it be grouped with work having a primitive impulse, but in the end, its neat, for-

mal look takes it out of this vital sphere.

More compelling — and this is because the images are basically amorphous — are the cast-bronze elements sculptured by Linda Cunningham that look ravaged and summon up the objective war-torn. Although the figures here do not take an upright human stance, war is certainly a message that Ms. Cunningham is out to explore.

Modern-era violence is the subject matter for the four remaining artists. Dotty Attie actually recapitulates events in the early years of Colonial America; in her hand-colored lithograph a woman is about to be scalped by two Indians, one of whom wears a, savage grin, and the other is about to wield his tomahawk. Ms. Attie's method is to present the image whole and next to it to present it cut up into blocks, separately framed. This technique underscores the action in a sort of cinematic way, for we feel that we are looking at closeups.

Black leather masks are the art vehicle on which Nancy Grossman rode to fame, but these drawings, mainly of men with their hands tied behind their backs, seem almost as tersely powerful; although the figures remain anonymous, one viscerally feels the horror. "Gunhead," in



Detail from "The Web," a photocollage by Cristina Biaggi.

which a weapon substitutes for a visage, reminds one of Ms. Grossman's masks.

The large painting by May Stevens builds to a drama when one scans it from left to right. At the left are rather shadowy images of young women from around the turn of the century. At the right, a group of women, who are obviously old and perhaps infirm because they are fixedly seated and seem to be wearing hospital dress, gesture vigorously as if they are protesting their treatment. In this painting, "Go Gentle," the time of life that one takes an active

part in arguing about conditions is, ironically, reversed.

There is irony, too, in Faith Ringgold's quilts, for quilts are the most hoary staples of women's art. Here the traditional squares are made into the floors of apartment buildings and the whole population looks out of the windows as the narrative unfolds. The story of the entire "Images of Power" exhibition is that when the curator, Joan Giordano, decided that lean and taut women's art was what she wanted, she went out and got it (through March 31). ■