NOMA's '5 Stylish Sons And Daughters Of Louisiana'

Louisiana artists have not yet formed a Cajun cabal in the New York art world, but apparently they have established a reputation for being flamboyant.

New York art critic Barbara Rose, sounding more like Suzy Knickerbocker than Hilton Kramer, described the "Five from Louisiana" honored at the New Orleans Museum of Art last Friday (Jan. 28) as the "Bayou Bunch."

In a brief notice in Vogue, Rose mentioned artists Lynda Benglis, Tina Girouard, Richard Landry, Robert Rauschenberg, and Keith Sonnier as "five stylish native sons and daughters of Louisiana." She added that in New York, "the Cajun crowd is the life of the party."

Local artist and city planner Bob Tannen reported that during a recent trip to New York, the art world was talking about little else but the Louisiana Five show.

If New York could be stirred by such a remote reunion, New Orleans art watchers were thoroughly roused form their winter reveries by the prospect of the grand homecoming. The turnout for the show was unprecedented.

NOMA curator Bill Fagaly worked for four years to bring the native siblings to New Orleans. The Five from Louisiana show was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and by matching funds from the local Parkside Foundation.

Fagaly and Director John Bullard published the catalogue for the exhibition in the Sunday Times-Picayune so that over 300,000 Orleanians would be aware of the phenomenon. Tennessee Williams was induced to introduce the segment on Lynda Benglis, which the playwright qualified with a rather coy apology for lack of expertise on the subject. Williams carefully refrained from actually commenting on Benglis's work, which she showed him in photographs in a hotel room interview, but the gallant Williams seemed dutefully impressed by her charm.

To be precise, the five Louisiana artists are more native cousins than sons and daughters, since all are from southwest Louisiana. If they were ever in New Orleans, they were just passing through.

Tina Girouard, Richard Landry, and Keith Sonnier were born in the Cajun hinterlands and studied at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, while Lynda Benglis, a native of Lake Charles, did study in New Orleans at Newcomb College with Ida Kohlmeyer.

Robert Rauschenberg's New Orleans connection is the most oblique, since he was born in Port Arthur, Texas, and subsequently adopted Lafayette as his home. (Rauschenberg himself did not attend the opening because of a prior commitment.)

None of the artists actually acknowledge their native milieu as a special influence, since most of them headed for New York as soon as they graduated from college. They all tended to become avant garde rather than regional artists, which perhaps accounts for their acclaim and acceptance in New York.

Keith Sonnier told his former teacher Calvin Harlan from USL that if he had stayed in Mamou, he would probably have "run the movie house, or worked in Joe's store or committed suicide at thirty."

Except perhaps for Rauschenberg's silk screen-collages, the pieces in the exhibition were accordingly alien to those unfamiliar with the New York scene. Art unplugged from the interplay of theories, techniques, fads, gossip, and galleries which helped to generate it may seem flat, lifeless, or indecipherable.

Thus Keith Sonnier's minimal neon and plexiglas seemed as remote from a local sensibility as the African collection upstairs. Tina Girouard's "Pinwheel" event would be merely a charade without her accompanying xeroxed explication. In fact, the huge turnout of culture fanciers seemed faintly disappointed after all the hullabaloo by the mere artifacts themselves.

One might conclude, in a vein similar to Tom Wolfe's iconoclasm in "The Painted World," that contemporary art requires interpreters ("critics") in order for the artist's creative energy and refinement of previous techniques to provoke a response in the viewer. Otherwise "minimal" art is simply barren.

Lynda Benglis's metallic knots and primate ones are simply rather unappealing curiosities unless one is aware of the undoubtedly sophisticated intent behind the product itself. When Benglis used familiar materials in her "Louisiana prop piece," as it was called in the catalogue, the effect was immediate. On the night of the opening, members walked up the steps of the museum by the light of flamelamps (which were secured with great difficulty from the Krewe of Comus), into what appeared to be a surreal version of Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras Museum.

Benglis had collaborated with her former teacher Ida Kohlmeyer in placing various decapitations from Kern's Carnival float warehouse around the Delgado great hall.

Ms. Kohlmeyer remarked that she loved the "common, cheap look" of the grotesque papier maché objets, finding in them "a folk art indigenous to us." She explains that the float artifacts are "so endearing you want to monumentalize them. They have a human quality because they're so destructible."

Benglis' delight in the giant perishable heads recalled a comment on her work in a 1974 issue of Artforum: "She takes a pleasure in vulgarity, which is central to Pop."

Aside from the Mardi Gras memorabilia and the Contemporary Arts Center party following the opening, the most accessible part of the show occurred on the cold rainy night of Sunday, Jan. 30. Richard Landry, who played in a band in Louisiana for several years before moving to New York and joining musical innovators like Philip Glass, performed an ineffably lovely saxophone and flute improvisation which was simultaneously taped and replayed in a quadrophonic delay system.

The effect suggested a fourfold instant replay of electronic singing in a frequency intelligible to the soul.—Carol Flake.