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### A small sampling from five artists

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The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania characterizes "Investigations," its three-year-old summer exhibition series, as featuring emerging artists or new work by established artists.

In fact, the five artists in this year's edition — painters Kenny Scharf and David Wojnarowicz, sculptors R. C. Fischer and John Ahearn and photographer William Larson — are too well-established to be "emerging" and much of the work they are showing isn't exactly new, in the sense that it hasn't been seen anywhere else before.

"Investigations," which runs through July 28, doesn't develop a theme. Its purpose is to showcase work that the exhibition curator — ICA assistant director Paula Marincola — believes worthy of attention.

None of the artists is being "discovered" through this show. Two, Scharf and Wojnarowicz, were in this year's Whitney Biennial, and Fischer had a show at the Whitney last year. All five have shown alone

and in groups in this country and in Europe, and all have been written about extensively in the art press.

This circumstance points up one minor problem with the "Investigations" format — it works best when the artists are relatively unknown. When they are, a selection of six to eight works, such as we have here, is enough to introduce them and pique one's curiosity. But with these artists, a small selection of work isn't enough for someone who follows contemporary art and thus probably already knows them.

That's the one problem I had with "Investigations" and why I found the half devoted to Larson, photography chairman at Tyler School of Art, more rewarding. Even if one knows his work, these groups of photographs, each representing a major series, can establish a sense of direction and a record of accomplishment.

Among the other artists, all New Yorkers, the small sample is most effective for Ahearn, whose three large wall sculptures were made in collaboration with artist Rigoberto (See 'INVESTIGATIONS' on 16-G)

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**INVESTIGATIONS,** from I-G Torres. Ahearn's sculptures, cast from life in reinforced plaster or fiberglass, are ineluctably connected to the social milieu from which they're drawn, the South Bronx.

Ahearn moved to the Bronx several years ago to put himself "at the farthest reaches from the center of the art world." His models, whose portraits he casts from full- or half-body rubber molds, are his black and Hispanic neighbors.

Ahearn's figures are similar to Duane Hanson's in replicating distinct individuals but different in being more animated and less dedicated to technical perfection. Hanson's illusions are so perfect as to be unsettling, but the figures themselves are impersonal. Ahearn is more concerned with human qualities that can't be translated materially.

His three pieces are all groups. The most delightful is *Double Dutch* at Kelly Street, four young black girls skipping rope. *Double Dutch*, an outdoor piece, is a freeze frame of care-free childhood in which the jumping girls are caught in midleap.

*Dawson Street* is a larger but much more subtle grouping of 16 bust-length figures mounted on a background of black roofing felt. These men, women and children are residents of that Bronx street. Ahearn presents them simultaneously as individuals who contrast with each other and as a neighborhood group.

*Dawson Street* is a very straightforward evocation of a place and time but also a moving one. Unlike Hanson, whose reality is actually too convincing, Ahearn translates a specific social situation into universal human terms; his contrivance makes the unfamiliar acceptable.

Fischer's giant lamp sculptures and a large metal and plastic fountain work the opposite way: Fischer takes familiar objects that have become invisible through constant utility and transforms them into unfamiliar objects that can be either mildly threatening or majestic.

Majestic is certainly the word for *American Electric*, a large horizontal construction fastened high on the gallery wall like a giant mechanical condor. Like all of Fischer's electrified pieces, *American Electric* might best be described as "lamplike" rather than as an appliance.

Fischer has extrapolated the basic lamp form into something far more grandiose, even noble, than one could imagine; it's a wonderful thrust of imagination combined with a little posturing. The result, however, is a piece that we cannot absolutely fix mentally, because it continually shifts back and forth between the reasonable and the improbable.

Fischer's fountain is similarly chimerical. It bubbles and gurgles pleas-

ingly as water wells up from the base of a giant conical vessel, and an overhead light creates delightful patterns of shadow and movement.

Yet in form and materials — stainless steel and plastic — it's an emotionally sterile corruption of an industrial object. It splashes and it soothes, therefore it's a fountain, not a cauldron — or is it?

Wojnarowicz represents the prototypical street artist. His art involves marking over printed material like supermarket posters or amalgamating fragments of graphic material with painting. Like many younger artists, he's concerned with semiotics — the language of symbols and the symbolic nature of language.

But because as a juvenile vagabond he literally grew up on the streets of New York, his art is commensurately gritty and blunt. Wojnarowicz isn't a great painter; he's more of a conceptualist and an assembler, as evidenced by his map-covered manikin of a child with flaming arms.

His images of homosexual rape, masturbation and giant ants devouring the world are harsh or, to some, revolting. They may not be lasting,

for Wojnarowicz's reliance on intuitive reaction to random stimuli — like reading Yukio Mishima's account of how a painting of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian prompted his first masturbation experience — results in a transient look and feel in the work. But if Wojnarowicz has sacrificed permanence for truth, he has made an acceptable exchange.

Scharf is the hottest, the most interesting and potentially the most significant of the four New Yorkers. A Los Angeles native, he's a '60s child who was weaned on color television — in an interview he recalled sitting with his nose pressed to the screen, watching the tiny dots that make up the picture change color.

Scharf must have grown up inside his television set, for when it comes to color and garishness he seems impossible to sate. A television set or a radio bores him unless it's painted pink and green and plastered with rhinestones and rubber dinosaurs.

Yet on canvas, his intoxication with color and his adolescent Looney Tunes zaniness is more thought-provoking. Scharf's surrealist cosmology comes from the Jetsons, the cartoon family of the future, and his

paintings look like Einstein's Theory of Relativity translated into Hanna-Barbera animations.

They're full of laughing, goofy, disembodied faces and streaking blobs painted in cheerful cereal-box colors, often against a black void. Don't laugh, folks: This is a post-Vietnam vision of Armageddon, the marriage of Jane Jetson to Henry Kissinger.

It hurts so much, it brings tears to your eyes. But, Scharf asks rhetorically, is anything other than hysterical laughter an intelligent response? And besides being funny, Scharf is a good painter, both in the way he organizes these frantic compositions and in the way he handles paint.

Aside from being, at 42, the elder statesman of this quintet, photographer Larson represents a totally different animal, as much concerned with expanding the potentialities of his medium as with developing radical new images. But in pursuing this goal, as we see from this selection of work dating to the late 1960s, as he broadened his technical reach he also expanded his vocabulary.

The most obvious feature of his work is its intellectual range, from the color narrative landscapes in the "Tucson Gardens" and "Urban View" series to "electro-carbon drawings," made with a teleprinter, which incorporate the aesthetics of collage, drawings and photography.

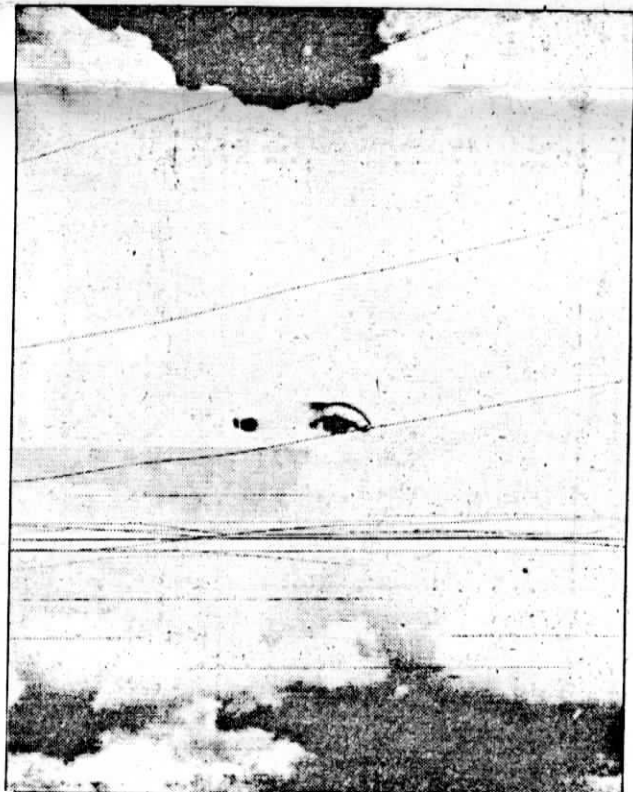
In between are large-scale still lifes in a landscape made with a pinhole camera, studio still lifes made with a Polaroid and sequences generated with color Xerography.

All of these series — there are about 10, depending on one's system of classification — proceed from a strong conceptual base. In the Xerography series, for example, the images coalesce out of random markings over a sequence of 64 frames (the frames were actually created in the reverse of that sequence, beginning with a Xerox of an original image).

In the "electro-carbon drawings," Larson acoustically interfered with the transmission of wire-photo images, resulting in lines and other alterations to the original that read as drawing.

In the "Tucson Gardens" and "Urban Views" photographs, he is more preoccupied with metaphorical inferences that can be drawn from the content and with compositional nuances. Where others might see open spaces, Larson sees barriers and the intrusion of power lines and similar industrial apparatuses.

Larson is unusually inquisitive, not only about his environment but about means available to interpret it. He has produced a thoughtful and imaginative body of work, not beautiful in the conventional sense but more useful for its provocativeness.



William Larson's "Untitled," above, an "electro-carbon drawing," and "Figure in Motion," below. The photographer's work is provocative, but not conventionally beautiful.