

# "Studio" helps remove mystique from art process

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PART OF THE thrill of art used to be the mystery of its making. Artists were special people set apart from the masses by a thing called talent, and they were inspired by super-human beings called muses. Where it all came from nobody knew — or wanted to know, for that matter. The mystery was part of the fun.

But then came the day of science, neatly identifying the muses of yore as natural human psychological processes and chipping away at the elitism of talent by ascribing it to early childhood development. The great democratic leveler, science hoisted process — both perceptual and craft — into the limelight as the great art idea of the 20th century.

For those who delight in cyclical history, it comes as no surprise that the art process itself is surrounded today with the same mystique that the art object once had. Though today almost anyone can call himself an artist and get away with it, the artist still has a special status within society, serving as a medium for the revered art process activated by modern-day muses of external influences.

The artist, his art process and environment — not the art object — are the featured "events" in the Museum of Fine Arts' new *Studio* show, opening Tuesday in Masterson Junior Gallery. This "behind-the-scenes" show contains four simulated studios of Houston artists Roberta Harris, Philip Renteria, Ben Woitena and Dick Wray; four videotaped conversations with the artists about their work and work spaces; artworks by the four artists, and a conglomerate studio of objects from various other artists' studios.

According to Alvia Wardlaw Short, MFA curator who designed the show, *Studio* is an effort to "remove the whole creative process out of a separate category and into the mainstream of life. It demonstrates that artmaking is a continual process."

Curator of education for the museum, Short conceived this show doubtless as an introduction to the inner sanctum of the art world for the art

lay person. While it works as a documentary idea, giving us a fuller picture of the people behind the art, it also has the double edge of sanctifying the art process — albeit interrupted by the static museum installation — as well as the peripheral accouterments of being an Artist. Who would have ever thought the contemporary art studio would become a museum piece, to be viewed like a room at historical Williamsburg?

Each of the four artists, all teachers at the MFA school, has his own corner in the show which retains the stall construction of the recent Christmas tree show. The objects they contributed to the show were chosen to represent meaningful or inspiring elements in their creative work. As a result, each of the corners has a distinct personality, often reflecting the style of art the four people produce.

Roberta Harris is the only artist displaying a work in progress, a huge layered work propped up on two saw horses. Renteria contributed several drawings, some color charts, a Chinese painting and a dried cactus. Wray's corner contains several drawings, a recently completed painting, a stuffed bird, a moose head, a huge clothes pin he used several years ago when he hung a mammoth brassiere across the construction site of the Contemporary Arts Museum, and some plants. Woitena's simulated studio has a framed copy of a mailgram to an art critic and several videotapes of sculpture constructions.

Short interviewed the four artists about their lives as artists and found several consistent complaints — the need for more space, more privacy, more recognition.

The center area of the gallery contains the composite studio of things contributed by other MFA School faculty members — an old kiln, an easel, a wool spinning tool.

*Studio* is an interesting idea for a show and a good effort to bring contemporary life to a museum which harbours a fairly stodgy status quo. But, that the idea occurred at all and the manner in which it is executed, videotape et al, reflects trends in art thinking today, a kind of titillating psycho-socio art history.

Art ideas may be different today, but the thrill isn't gone.



Photo by Sam C. Pierson, Chronicle Staff

In the creative environment which works best, Roberta Harris sits in her own studio to be reproduced in the

Museum of Fine Arts' exhibition *Studio* opening Tuesday.