Art/Kay Larson

MIXED MESSAGES

"...Antony Gormley is one of England's most successful recent exports. Joan Mitchell's painting obliges you to fall in love..."

EMOTIONAL RESCUE: *Joan Mitchell's* Wind.

THE MOST UNNERVING SIGHT IN SOHO THESE days, setting aside Vito Acconci's huge plaster bras (which I'll get to shortly), is a tide of terra-cotta people, each about as high as your hand, jammed together on the floor of Salvatore Ala Gallery. There are 35,000 of them, I'm told (I didn't stop to count). The point is that they are beyond counting. Their mass constitutes their message.

You come on them unexpectedly, after a long walk down the gallery's oddly empty railroad-flat rooms, while wondering where is this **Antony Gormley** show you expected to see. Suddenly, there they are, filling a doorway and the space behind. Their oceanic expanse, mottled with browns and grays from an erratic kiln, laps the edges of walls and fills corners beyond your line of vision. Muddled clay bodies and heads with nubbin eyes stare blankly forward— a gringo's nightmare of Malthusian population curves in the Third World.

Gormley is one of England's most successful artist exports of the past decade. He is known for nicely crafted humanist sculpture, a position that lends credibility to his intentions here—which otherwise might well be considered dubious. The figures (according to the gallery) were commissioned from the Texca family in Cholula, Mexico, a brick-making region. Many artists turn the fabrication of their work over to assistants, a trend that has its unfortunate aspects. One is the possibility of unpleasant hypocrisy, as when the artist is not nearly as technically proficient as the journeyman hired to execute the ideas. Gormley's problem is something of the opposite. He runs the risk of being charged with exploiting Third World artisans to sell his own name.

Against that accusation you can mount a reply based on interpretation—tricky but necessary. The human wave of *Field* constitutes an experience of numbers beyond comprehension—ranks of primal sculptures that are ciphers without measure. The ambiguities reverberate in the mind's fear zone. There is the title itself: "field" as in agriculture, or an energy field, or a mathematical array. Pitted against this subliminally charged state is the orange-brown clay—literally, salts of the earth—from which the humanoids are formed. The advance begins to look like the one that daily pressures America's southern borders—in other words, it whispers about the politics of race.

By being beyond counting—beyond the mind's rational control—the otherwise harmless clay wave echoes the X billion people on the planet. Every nine months, I recently heard, Egypt adds another million babies to its population pool—but it's not growing as fast as eastern Africa. The Malthusian curve is steep and headed for the stratosphere, as are the global-warming indexes that follow it and will bring the greatest disaster to the warmest countries. Dreadful suffering is to come.

Gormley has made a subtle political decision to let the hands of Mexican artisans mold their Doppelgängers. Size and placement are crucial—you look down on these figures, and they look up. They must be artless—beyond the artist's touch. Only this way will the human field be anonymous, crushing, startling. Once you've seen it, you can turn away, but the eyes follow you. And in that, there is a hint of the future. (560 Broadway; through May 4.)

"I PAINT OUT OF LOVE," **Joan Mitchell** HAS said. But love is fickle—it's full of passion and clear emotion if you're in the middle of it, and if you're not, it doesn't communicate. That's pretty much the problem I've had with Mitchell's painting. It obliges you to fall in love—to believe without criticality. Yet the neophyte's worst habit is to read "moods" into abstract art. I don't see here the kind of tough intellectualism that characterized, say, Lee Krasner. What Mitchell offers lately is an Impressionist palette of sweet pinks and purples, clear tones—flower colors.

But survival should count for something, and so should dogged endurance and a life lived in the freedom of the senses. After her first New York show, in 1952, Mitchell exhibited at the Stable Gallery for several years, earning her membership in the Abstract Expressionist club. Even if her second-generation Ab Ex lacks the fiery Surrealist infusions of her elders'—even if the easygoing brushwork and apparent effortlessness is disconcerting—still, it's worth something that she was one of a handful of women who didn't give up. The price of being female in the New York School was demonstrated not long ago at the Whitney's Philip Morris branch. Perhaps half the works were by women—fine painters, often better than the men—who later caved in and disappeared. Sometimes the best artist is the one who sticks it out.

Mitchell ignored Pop and Minimalism and runs crosswise to Conceptualism. Ei-

Photograph courtesy of the Robert Miller Gallery.

ther you accept who she is or you shift your attention elsewhere. My own drift in her direction is a result of the superb colorist grace of these late works. I find myself drawn into their emotional weather. Each painting is its own meteorological system. Color and gesture, like air and water vapor, buoy each other up. A change of emotional temperature brings a new front and precipitates a collision. Perhaps their new clarity comes from the white background that opens them up and allows atmosphere to penetrate, as it does so well in the stormy *Wind.* Like the sky itself, they are what they are. (Robert Miller, 41 East 57th Street; through April 20.)

SCULPTOR **Robin Hill** GATHERS MOMENTUM. Her third show at Lang & O'Hara is a spooky agglomeration of waist-high vessels that could be mutating condoms or desert water bags made of hyperthyroid-goat stomachs. Metaphors aside, these are fascinating voluminous objects, hollow and shell-like. In the case of a heart-like piece called *Valve,* the thin, translucent skin is of fiberglass, resin, muslin, beeswax, and rabbit-skin glue. Other works in this series might also be of paper, latex rubber, tin, and even rice starch. The fragility of this handmade surface—which resembles viscera or parchment; that is, dried epidermis—calls forth an acute sense of mortality. These sculptures seem to be husks of formerly living creatures. Their shapes can't be directly identified, yet you feel somehow they must be accepted into the lexicon of biology.

Hill is concerned with transformation and mutation of forms. Life, which changes, is for that reason vulnerable, and its shapes are laced with organic pathos and spirit. On this same ground, Eva Hesse made a considerable reputation. But Hill, who is 36, takes quite a different direction. These are objects threaded through with thoughtfulness. Keep an eye on her. (568 Broadway; through April 13.)

SO WHAT DO WE DO WITH **Vito Acconci,** the merry prankster? In the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, he installed four Olympus-size bras made of wire mesh and rebar, with "cups" of wire mesh overlaid with plaster, and a "lining" of fitted canvas. Acconci has always played fast and loose with sex and danger, but lately only as caricature.

These aren't much more than a joke—albeit a good one. Turn the "cups" vertically and they become chairs, upside down and they become huts. His waggling finger points at houses and homes, a standard Acconci obsession. I suppose you could title this show "At Home With Sex." Or "The Erotic Dome-icile." This was the latest, and one of the best, in a long series that has taken sculpture dangerously close to playground equipment. (99 Greene Street; closed.)

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