How a Curator Temporarily Turns Into a Judge

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

SUMMIT

THE New Jersey Center for Visual Arts has been staging its annual International Juried Show for more than 10 years now, and the ground rules are firmly in place. What goes into the exhibition is up to a single judge with strong credentials in the New York art world. For this year's competition, the judge was Thelma Golden, associate curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art and director of the Whitney's Phillip Morris branch in Manhattan.

Ms. Golden was the main curator of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, one of the most hotly debated Whitney shows ever because of its heavy emphasis on work with explicit social themes, political content, and innovative and unorthodox presentation. But as Ms. Golden made clear in a phone interview, there is no similarity between being a curator, who conceives an entire exhibition, and the task she performed at Summit, being shown a number of artworks and asked to pick the best.

As a curator, "you start out with certain ideas," she said. "You consider the artists' backgrounds, their exhibition record, what grants they've been awarded. You're making a show, and all of these factors go into it."

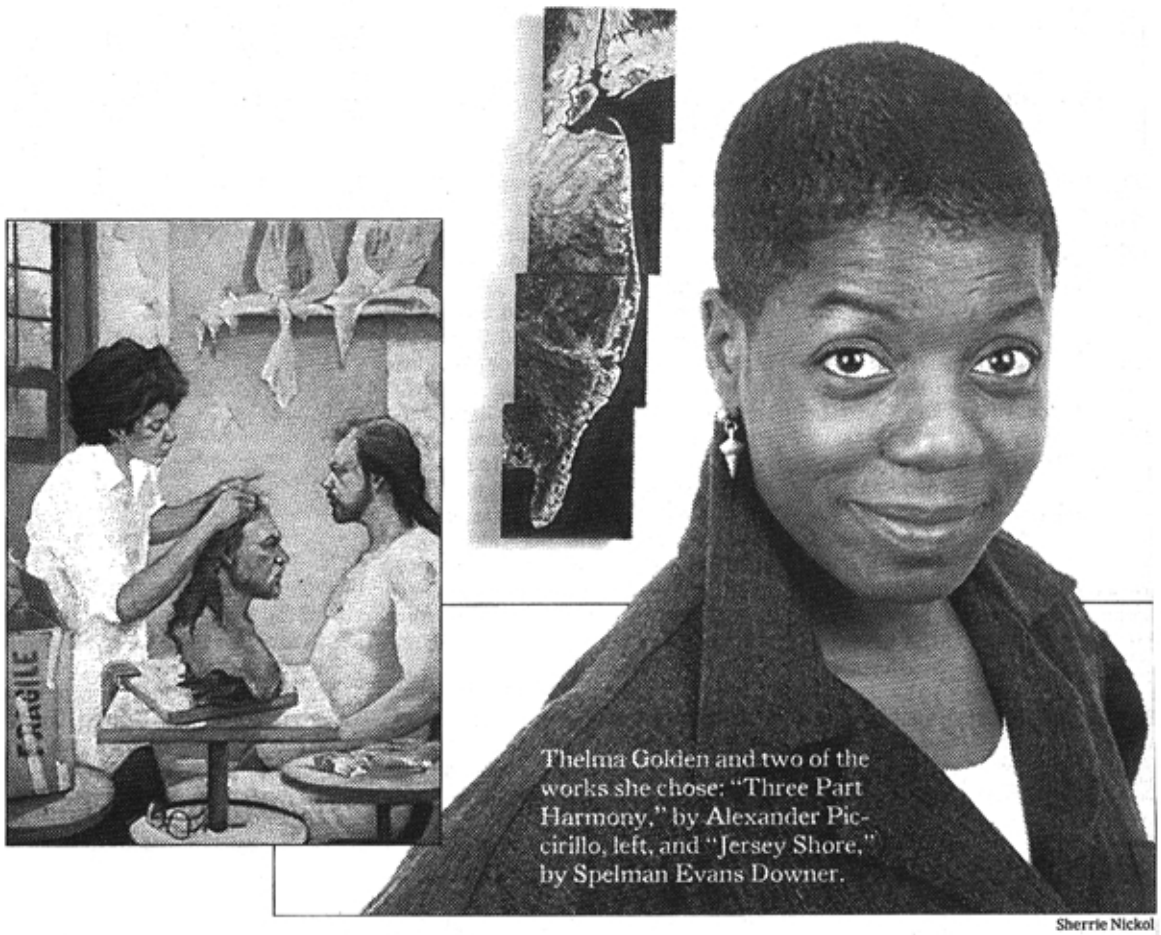
On the other hand, jurying, at least the way it is handled at Summit, is much more circumspect and anonymous. And Ms. Golden relishes the chance to focus purely on the art itself.

"I can't even tell you the names of the winners," she said. "My responsibilities were purely visual. There were no artists whose slides were in the many carousels I saw whose work I even knew, and I wasn't furnished with names, biographies or any other information."

According to the gallery's set routine, her duties were split by a couple of months. In early December she was shown more than 800 slides. The artworks she chose from them were then taken to the gallery in late February for a second round of judging. A work of art in the flesh can look very different from the way it does in a slide, sometimes with embarrassing results. But, Ms. Golden said, "There were no surprises except perhaps in terms of scale, about which slides can be very deceptive."

Ms. Golden denied that the exhibition resulting from her choices has some sort of overall theme, but others associated with the gallery give her more credit in shaping the show. "Multiculturalism became a theme, though Thelma never said anything about it," said the center's executive director, Joan Good. "It is clear, at any rate, that she was dedicated to the new and original."

Ms. Good pointed to the sculpture "Cycle" by Deborah Farre. Standing on the floor like a disheveled maypole, it consists of a slew of transparent polyethylene envelopes fitted on a spindle through grommets on their flaps. It's in the tradition of the Dadaist found object. "I've realized that this is political," Ms. Good said. "It's about the environment, about using discarded things again."



Thelma Golden and two of the works she chose: "Three Part Harmony," by Alexander Piccirillo, left, and "Jersey Shore," by Spelman Evans Downer.

Sherrie Nickol

INTERNATIONAL JURIED SHOW '96

New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, 68 Elm Street Summit

Seventy-one works selected by Thelma Golden. Through next Sunday. Hours: Monday through Friday, 1 to 4 P.M; Thursday evening, 7:30 to 10 P.M.; Saturday and Sunday, 2 to 4 P.M.

IN awarding first prize, Ms. Golden confirms, she was torn between two very different works. For the grand prize, she eventually chose "Meadowlands," a painting by Spelman Evans Downer of Hoboken. He makes what look like multi-panel, imagery-filled abstract paintings but are actually topographical maps of the New Jersey Meadowlands. Ms. Golden cited his novel way of making an abstract painting out of very specific information. The potential grand prize winner she bypassed was "Self With 4H Ribbon," by Suen Wong of Chicago. The young woman depicted is obviously the artist's much younger self, determined and proud. Her pride is understated, carried by the emblem of the green ribbon on her chest. Ms. Wong's painting is an unexpected, poignant statement about self-esteem.

For the most part, representational painting is the most alluring in this show. "Martin at Barneys," by Sue Ellen Leys, shows a young man casually eyeing a rack of suits. It's not clear if he's going to plunge into consumerism, but the painting is a low-key celebration of the contemporary material world. The implied idealism of "Three Part Harmony," by Alexander Piccirillo, is very strong. In it a prim young female sculptor is working in clay on a portrait bust of a heavy-set, long-haired man with a rose tattoo on his upper arm. The sculptor, the sculpture and the sculpted are of different orders, and yet there is unity of purpose.

The exhibition has many such representations of ordinary folk occupied with ordinary things — for instance, Andrea Robbins's "Waiting for Dad," a pencil drawing of a boy on a porch, and Gail Wegodsky's traditional portrait of a young, confident black woman, Elizabeth Elango — that lend the show the aura Ms. Good identified as multiculturalism.

To be sure, the show includes a wide range of work. Particularly impressive are some objects in an archeological vein. On a low table, Mickey Giardina alternates boomeranglike shapes made of clay with clusters of stones. He calls the work "Fault Correction System," and how such a system works remains enticingly mysterious. "Ashes," by Marianne O'Barr, is a relief sculpture on handmade paper of a human skeleton in a relaxed position. It's a grim image, but the skeleton's casual deportment makes it somehow comforting.

The show was realized with the help of many people who do the nuts-and-bolts work of mounting an exhibition, who sat at Ms. Golden's elbow and recorded her choices, among other duties. These are veterans who have seen slides and then art objects come and go for years. One of them, Marylou Hillyer, a member of the center's accountability committee, can rattle off statistics. Among them: the total number of entries was down slightly this year, and none of the eight entries from foreign countries were chosen. Some of the decline is probably due to the fact that persistent artists apply over and over again without being chosen. On the other hand, eight or nine works are in this show by artists who have been in the two previous ones. As for hard numbers, artists from 37 states entered, and 19 states, including New Jersey, are represented. Sixteen of the 71 works in the show are by New Jersey artists.

For her part, Ms. Golden said she thought competition was handled very well. If the show she chose has a strong humanistic cast, she attributed it to the center's long history of staging the competition and "its ability to reach out and attract that kind of entry."