

Show questions New York's dominance

"Palimpsest" at the Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, through July 30.

With "Palimpsest" the Fuller Museum of Art takes a bold, sure step into the global arena.

Recognizing that art, like everything else, is no longer the exclusive domain of a few locales, or that cities like New

VISUAL ARTS Mary Sherman

York are not the only places where important art is being made, many museums and art festivals have finally begun to showcase work that no longer adheres to Western, primarily white male artistic practices.

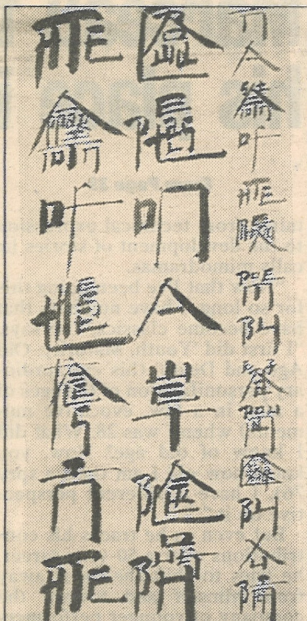
This trend toward a more inclusive world art view may be both long overdue and crucial given the times in which we live, but make no mistake, old ideas die slowly. The idea that New York and the Western world have the tightest hold on aesthetic standards shows little sign of abating. "Palimpsest" brilliantly underscores and questions that fact.

In an amazing coup for a small museum, the Fuller has put together a tightly focused show of the work of three outstanding international artists: Ambreen Butt, born in Pakistan; Ahmed Abdalla, from Egypt; and the current darling of international biennials and major exhibitions, Xu Bing, originally from China.

Like many such international artists, all three now live or work in the United States, which, oddly, continues to be seen as the beacon for the most interesting art being produced today.

What further unites all of them is that their work still shows traces of their birthplaces or in some way deals with their ethnic backgrounds. Thus, the show gets its title "Palimpsest," referring to a parchment, piece of paper or other surface that has been written upon a number of times in such a way that the older writings still remain, albeit barely visible.

This idea is most apparent in Abdalla's work, which here consists of a few canvases and a huge painting executed directly onto one of the museum's towering walls.



NEW VIEW: Xu Bing undermines assumptions about cultures and tendencies to romanticize them with 'New English Calligraphy.'

The surfaces of his multi-layered paintings include symbols, what looks like script, mathematical equations or, given his background, hieroglyphics. These marks, however, are diffuse and not completely decipherable. Like a palimpsest, layers of pale colors and more recent marks tend to partially obscure them.

The large wall piece, because of its size and the predominance of warm beiges and muted earth tones, also suggests cave drawings, prehistoric burial sites or other places embedded with history and the marks of former inhabitants.

All this would seem to make sense, as Abdalla is from the land of ancient mysteries, pharaohs and lost civilizations. But

like the other artists in the show, he is using this assumption on our part to undermine it, to make us realize that our heritages are more alike than different, less exotic than common.

In actuality, many of Abdalla's marks refer to his earlier mathematical studies. Aesthetically, the scrawls along his paintings' surfaces have more in common with the American artist Cy Twombly's calligraphic-like work than Egyptian cuneiform. Abdalla, clearly, is not provincial; his work is informed by the leading movements of this century, transformed into his own means of expression, and informed by some of the major issues facing artists today.

Ambreen Butt's paintings, which typically are small, look very much like traditional Islamic miniatures — highly realistic and narrative. The figures in her paintings are dressed in traditional garb, her colors are jewel-toned and her surfaces consist of precise details — chock full of pattern and decoration.

For "Palimpsest," she, like Abdalla, has created a large wall painting, in effect blowing up her work into Western dimensions. The result seems a bit forced, much as the text collaged into her work, "Art is an Instrument for Any Right."

Consisting of a woman looking into a mirror surrounded by arabesques and stripes that lack her usual precision, Butt wants us to consider who determines what is right. She wants us to think about how art is used by those arbitrators of taste, morality and power to legitimize their rights, and how their determinations necessarily set up a power structure whereby those that are not considered "right" tend to be oppressed.

Her idea is certainly provocative, but it's hard to grasp the full implications of her text, given the choice of her somewhat benign imagery.

Her work also suffers from its close proximity to Xu Bing's, which couldn't be more delightful — delightfully subversive, pointed and playful.

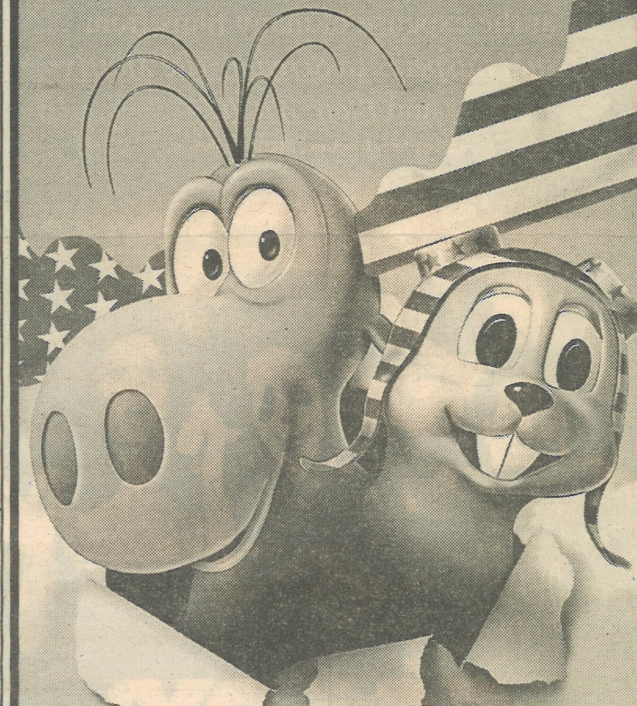
For his piece, Bing has created a classroom-like situation, complete with rows of school desks. In the front of the room is a videotape of a British teacher extolling the joys of learning calligraphy and explaining the intricacies of how to create the "Chinese" characters, displayed on the papers around the room. At each desk, viewers can try their hand at recreating these characters in the step-by-step practice books provided, using the brushes and

ink that are also provided.

It is only after some time, after painstakingly trying to make effortless-looking strokes, however, that one realizes that Xu Bing has pulled one over on us: The forms that we are making look like Chinese characters, but they are actually English letters and words, designed to look somewhat strange.

They are part of Xu Bing's "New English Calligraphy," and they do a brilliant job of undermining our assumptions about another culture and, by extension, our tendencies to romanticize it — to see it as something foreign or outside of our own experience.

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