Violence colors artworks

'Crime and Punishment' attacks urban epidemic

By Dorothy Burkhart
Art Writer

ANDY WARHOL, Robert Arneson, Bruce Conner and Valerie Patten are not a customary mix for an exhibition. But "violence" makes strange showmates and they are among the 65 contributors to "Crime and Punishment," at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, through April 1.

Dostoyevsky's novel of the same name has nothing to do with this "Crime and Punishment" other than to provide a catchy title. Unlike that epic, the relationship between crime and punishment in this show remains unclear. It's the subtitle, "Reflections of Violence in Contemporary Art," that gets closer to its meaty subject — urban violence.

"Crime and Punishment," co-curated by Triton director Jo Farb Hernandez and assistant director Marc D'Estout, reinforces what you already know (unless you've been wearing blinders for the decade): Violence is not only alive but also fueling the imagery of increasing numbers of artists. Yet it's a pity that a show with such a strong theme and one that draws upon such potentially explosive material is not as powerful as it could have been.

This can be explained, in part, by the works displayed. "Crime and Punishment" suffers from what appears to be a growing epidemic. In order to attract the public, works by "famous" artists appear, however little they add to the subject.

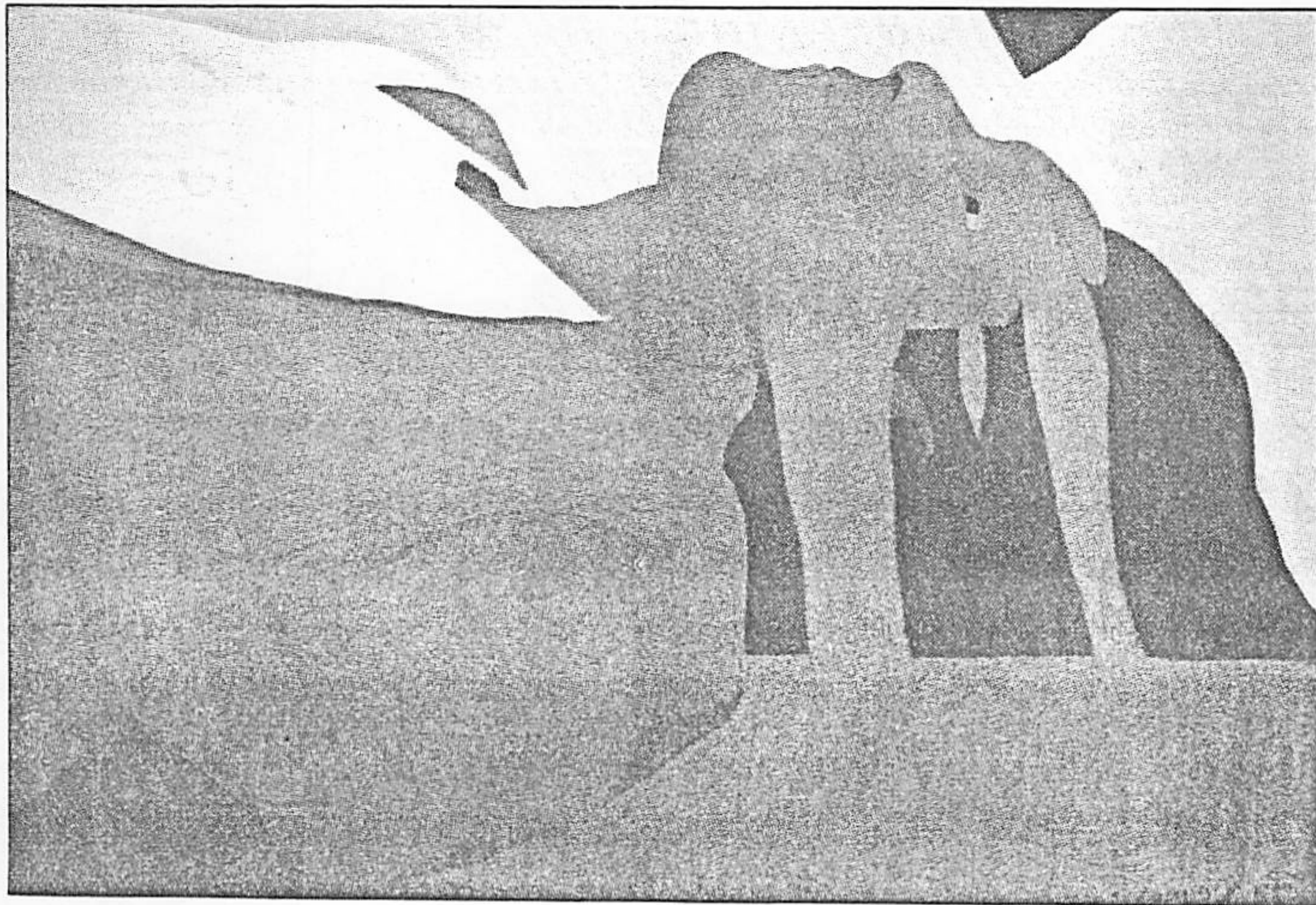
Moreover, there's also the real and decidedly frustrating problem of museums not being able to borrow the best examples of an artist's work and, therefore, substituting lesser pieces and weakening the overall impact. Several pieces here are examples of this practice: Wayne Thiebaud's weak and atypical 1957 "Electric Chair" and Ed Kienholz's dull 1981 "The Deep Purple Rage." There are also works by younger artists who make references to violence, but they are cliches (Barry Nelson's 1981 "School Mates") or have little bite (Hugh Brown's 1981 "Where's Jimmy?"). What we get then is tamed violence.

There's little in "Crime and Punishment" to send us screaming into the street or to beat on the doors of city hall to push for social change. The exhibition offers a forum for stimulating discussion. But I have my doubts that the show will, as the catalog introduction optimistically suggests, "resolve some of the anxiety and concern surrounding" urban violence.

Yet whatever the flaws of the show as a whole, it boasts many individually interesting and, as expected, aggressive images that crackle with strident color.

"Crime and Punishment" covers more than two decades and includes paintings, sculptures and works on paper that are distributed about the Triton's three gallery/pavilions. A small section in the entrance gallery introduces a handful of nationally known artists who examined

Continued on Page 2D



Rupert Garcia's "Assassination of a Mexican Worker" is one of exhibit's strongest works

Flaws weaken art exhibit's strong theme

Continued from Page 1D

violence from the '60s on, among them Bruce Conner, Andy Warhol, Robert Arneson, Thiebaud, John Battenberg and Nancy Grossman.

The remaining pavilions are devoted to artists primarily known (but not exclusively) in California, for example, Paul Pratchenko, Clayton Bailey, Shari Lamanet, Suzanne Lacy. Although their art contributions vary widely, the participants in "Crime and Punishment" are, for the most part and in varying degrees, concerned with the same kinds of issues.

Murder, for example. One artist who puts his power of originality behind his conviction is Rupert Garcia. Garcia's moving painting, "Assassination of a Mexican Worker" (1979), in which blood oozes from a peasant's face, is one of "Crime and Punishment's" strongest works. Few people have their skills as artists and their politics together as Garcia, who eloquently visualizes the social injustice of murder.

Richard Kamler also has produced a strong work on murder. He has built and installed on the spot a prison cell called "Maximum Security" that emits taped sounds and voices and stands as a vivid document of prison conditions. Sometimes more affecting are real-life documents, such as Ruth Pine Morgan's untitled, 1983, black-and-white photo that shows a handcuffed inmate standing patiently in his narrow cell; the impact of this piece is heightened by its larger-than-life size.

I found disappointing Robert Arneson's small ceramic sculpture, "Dan, November 27, 1978" (1983), which refers to Dan White's murder of San Francisco mayor George Moscone. The Triton piece seems more a spinoff of Arneson's monumental and moving 1981 memorial bust "Portrait of George" than a compelling new work. ("Portrait of George" is currently on view at the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco.)

Another theme "Crime and Punishment" explores is rape. The strongest pieces again are photographs, these by Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy, who have focused on the issue as a social concern since the mid-'70s. They staged a costumed, week-long media event, documented here by "In Mourning and in Rage" (1977), on the steps of the Los Angeles City Hall, protesting the wave of rape-murders in that city.

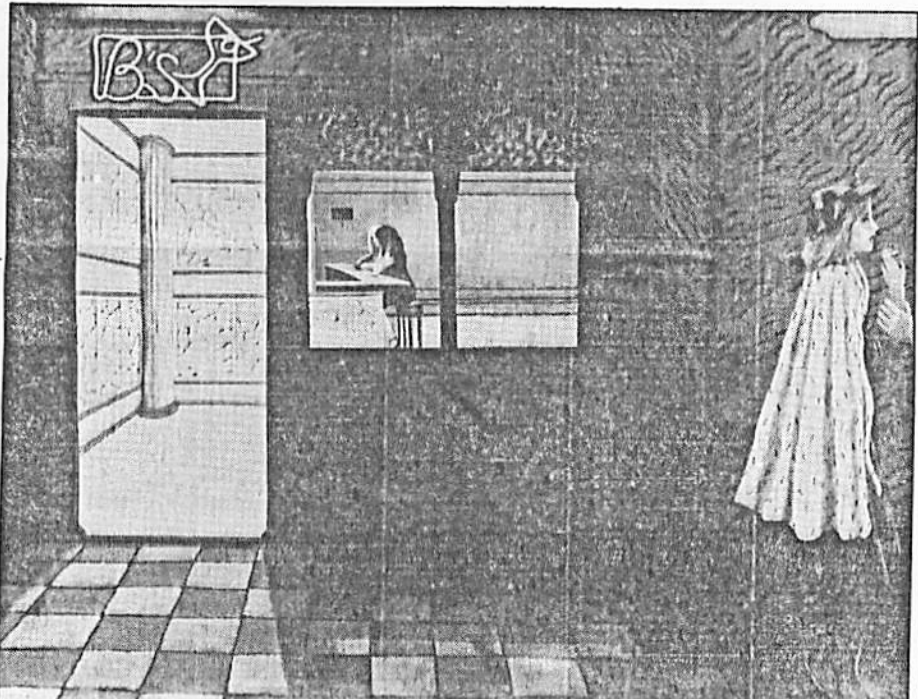
Compared to Labowitz and Lacy's contributions, Kienholz's assemblage, "The Deep Purple Rage," is surprisingly ho-hum. A pair of auto headlights, a sad-eyed woman peering at us from a small window, a fiberglass hot dog used as a phallus. I know he's making a *statement* with this murky, ambiguous piece, but what's he saying about rape?

The range of crimes illustrated in the Triton show paints a dismal, upsetting picture of the times. In addition to murder, rape, gang crimes, arson and a host of other real or fictional crimes, domestic violence figures prominently. These include Kelly Detweiler's cluttered and undecipherable narrative painting, "Crime of Passion" (1982), as well as Frank Dixon's large, violent, emotion-packed canvas, "Violent Scenario" (1982). With its wildly tilting perspectives from which shadowy figures emerge shooting at an embracing couple, who knows what's going on? And anyway does it matter when we get such a high-pitched, lushly painted, visual whodunit?

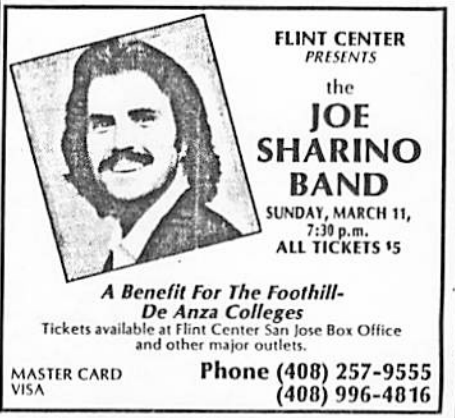
There is art in "Crime and Punishment" that contrasts with Dixon's hot, aggressive imagery, like Valerie Patten's terrifying "B's: They're Always Stronger" (1983). A stylistically cool work, it makes a strong statement with its inferred violence. In it, two women sit at a bar while a third outside on the street is being grabbed by a hand reaching from the edge of the canvas. Is something violent about to happen? Patten allows our imaginations to take over; the message she gets across is that contemplating the crime can be more horrifying than seeing it spelled out. Which contrasts with Guy Colwell's approach. He hits us with nearly every crime conceivable. In "Pink Streets" (1981), Colwell depicts violent, heated scenarios, their temperature somewhat lowered by sugary-pastel colors. This painting adds up to more is less; it doesn't speak with much presence. Yet its subject — violence — reinforces the truth that life is not separate from art.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, Triton Museum of Art, 1505 Warburton Ave. Santa Clara, in the Santa Clara Civic Center, through April 1. Catalog $10, plus tax. Noon-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; noon-5 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. Free. (408) 248-4585.

Donna Mossholder's domestically violent 'Devil Beating his Wife' (1980)



Violence is inferred in Valerie Patten's 'B's: They're Always Stronger' (1983)



ENTERTAINMENT
FINE FOOD, SPIRITS AND GAMING
MARCH 11th
Sunday
Night
Jazz Series
8:00 p.m.
LARRY DUNLAP KEYBOARDS
AND BOBBE NORRIS VOCALIST
WITH THE
SMITH DOBSON TRIO
COMING ATTRACTIONS
MAR. 18—JOE HENDERSON
TENOR SAX