

Linoleum resurfaces — in the form of art

PLACES, 18 mixed-media constructions by Toronto artist Barbara Astman, on view at the Nickle Arts Museum, U of C (West Campus), until July 31. Illustrated catalogue: \$3.

Butter yellow, sugar pink and mint green aren't the colors one expects on the walls of a gallery filled with contemporary art, but they look right at home with Barbara Astman's Places.

The 32-year-old Toronto artist's 18 mixed-media constructions, all made in 1982, are made mostly of the kind of linoleum that covered miles and miles of kitchen floors in the 1950s.

How time changes taste, one well might think. Once the "latest" thing, the speckled, spotted, marbled or mottled kitchen floor covering was relegated to the kitsch bin two decades ago. It resurfaces elegantly in Astman's hands, however, and this is one of the nicest surprises of the show.

Astman, who managed to find a vintage cache that includes 30-year-old tiles of every conceivable color and pattern, unexpectedly turns the serviceable stuff into clean constructivist tableaux of geometric shapes arranged on small shelves.

The linoleum is, in fact, the key element that animates this work. Astman chose the chameleon material for its built-in abilities and multiple identities. It easily evokes a specific period and its styles, and with them memories of growing up in the interiors of the '50s.

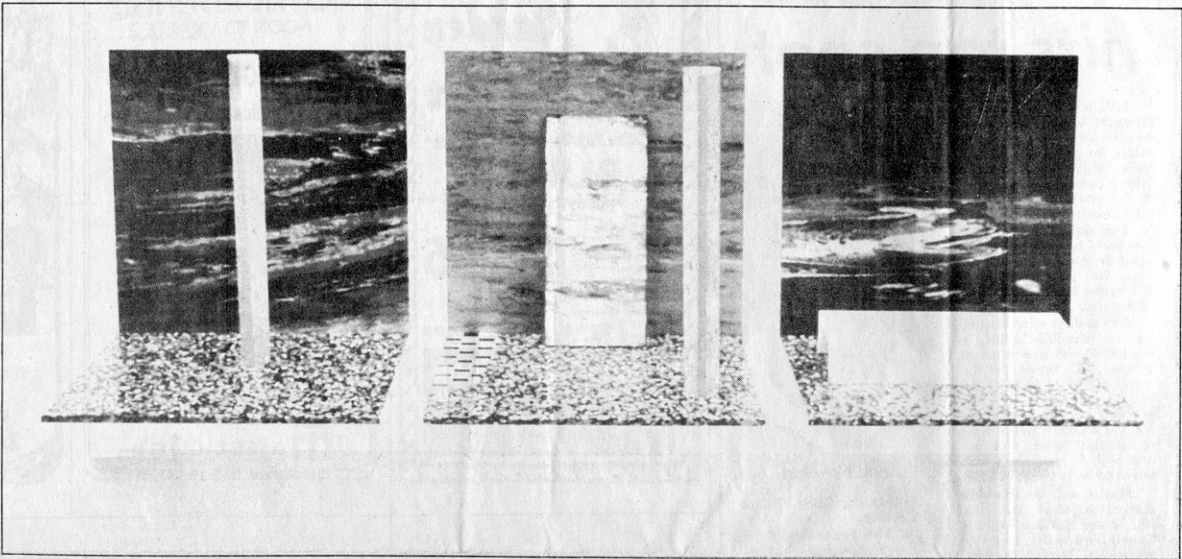
As a vehicle for solid color, it has its own peculiar beauty. And because of its wide range of patterns, the linoleum can suggest the textures and surfaces of many other materials besides itself, and environments other than interiors as well.

While the pieces captioned *mothers kitchen, cottage country, teenage recroom neckroom, florida room, and bedroom badroom* recroomare places Astman knew as child and adolescent: *l'atrio di sicilia* or *antwerp* by *stahl* relate to more recent experiences of European cities.

The little inscriptions that accompany each work are, by the way, not to be mistaken for titles. The words are there, Astman says, to provide a point of view for looking at a work. Many are verbal puns that reinforce a kind of visual punning, like the pink "girl's room" idea in *bedroom, badroom, recroom*.

Each piece actually began as a diaristic story which worked out a visual description in words. Still, it's surprising to notice, when listening to Astman talk about individual pieces, how literal her imagination is and how specific are the works' references.

The first piece in the series, *1954 backyard background*, is



L'Atrio di Sicilia (1982), a mixed-media construction by Barbara Astman



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the fussiest and most literal visually. But even in *looking over looking down*, a piece about looking out of an airplane window, the formal elements refer to backyard swimming pools Astman saw from on high during a takeoff at Philadelphia.

Astman aims at reminding herself of her emotional responses to places in these works, and at creating a similar response in the viewer through his or her apprehension of the objects she creates.

Her forms are cool and formal, simple arrangements of geometric shapes and solids. Emotional qualities come partly from compositions which reinforce the suggestiveness of a shape — the rectangular slabs in *shared accommodations* that read as beds, for instance — and from color.

Astman attaches psychological and emotional significance to colors. "Purple," she says, "means I am mentally and emotionally immature." "Grey is exhaustion, is stress, is deple-

tion." "Red speeds up my pulse..." Etc.

It could be, however, that her obsessive translation of literal details directly into the substructure of a work is what makes it work on some subconscious or intuitive level. It's hard to know. And it's doubtful that the same recognitions would be triggered in every viewer since the experiences embodied in the work are bound so closely by middle-class experience and a certain degree of affluence.

In a way, this is real North American Princess Art complete with the pink bedroom she slept in, the rec-room she necked in, the summer cottage she played in, her first apartment, her trips to Europe, etc.

But it's here that the linoleum saves the day — by turning Places into a statement about the culture and about style. The same culture that sanctioned frilly pink environments for little middle-class girls to grow up in, now allows a common floor covering to become a material for high art (Astman is not the first to use it) and encourages little girls to play with hammers as well as dolls.

One obvious question raised by Places is how much of our identity, both as individuals and as a culture, is shaped by the force of prevailing styles — in decor, dress, food, health, education, political philosophy, etc.? Who sets them? Why follow them? Why do they change?

Is an artist ever any more

than a stylist or a decorator? Is classical ideal of high art dead on its feet? Is the only vitalizing force in contemporary art to be found in popular culture?

One could feel more comfortable with this attractive work if one could be sure that its ironic, questioning edge were intentional. Most of it seems pretty straightforward ideologically (and therefore naive), as well as romantic and narcissistically self-satisfied.

Still, the notion of stereotyped domestic interiors as the containers of certain kinds of experiences common to members of the same culture is one with possibilities. The most effective of the pieces are those that manage to evoke the most implications from the least literal or pictorial means. These would be stronger still if Astman could make their allusions work without captions to help out.

Places and their foray into three dimensions marks a significant departure for Astman, whose work has been involved with photography for the last several years. And despite the continuation of strong autobiographical content in the new work, it is the first by Astman in years that does not center on her own image. This distancing helps the work by enlarging its possibilities.

Astman plans next to build almost life-sized environments like these model-sized rooms. The exercise should be interesting. There are many implica-

tions to explore in this new direction of her work.
