

Astman gives plastic new meaning

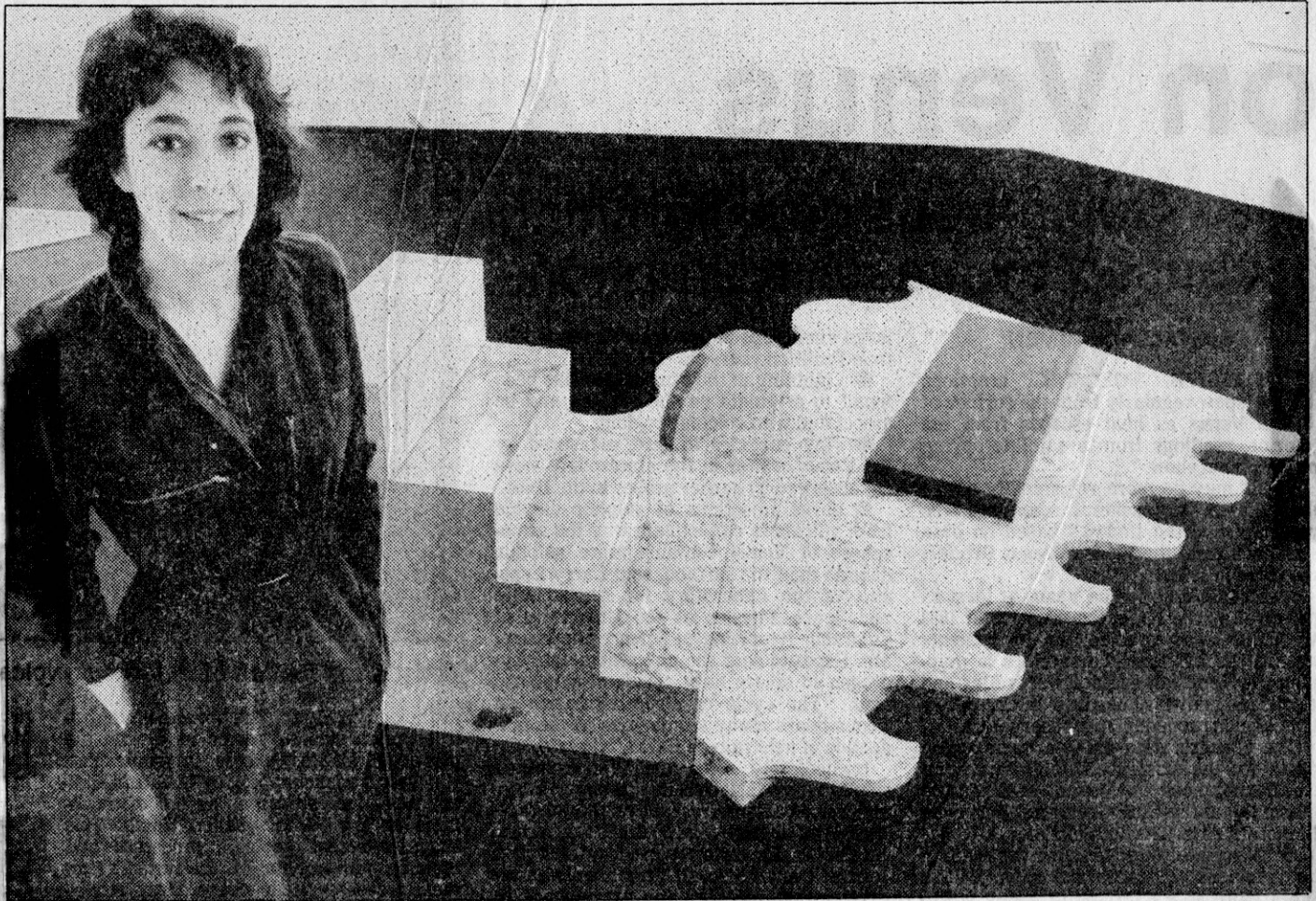
BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

Barbara Astman at the Sable-Castelli Gallery, 33 Hazelton Ave., to March 31.

What is Barbara Astman going to think of next? For her 1982 Sable-Castelli show, she left behind her well-tailored, tasteful photographic portraits, raided an old linoleum warehouse in Rochester, N.Y., and turned out 18 fine, terse sculptures made of floor covering.

For her current exhibit, Astman has once again gone shopping in the Modern Living section of the hardware store, and has come up with stuff even less likely than linoleum to make it into an art gallery: plastic laminate (a.k.a. Formica, Arborite, etc.) The results are 10 formal constructions for wall and floor, some of them wonderful, called Settings for Situations.

Inspecting the 10 works, we find that Astman has cut and sculpted the sheets of faked marble, wood, carpet or whatever with a jeweller's precision, and a designer's sense of socko visual effect. But only three works — the large ones on the floor — rocket past craftsmanship and become compelling artistic objects. In these successful works, the weirdly slick, unnatural colors and the unearthly cleanness of the plastic exist in near-perfect tension with the formal construction, producing things of fine conceptual rigor. The odd material — the body and soul of banality — here becomes very unbanal, and does a good job of situating the work outside the natural and friendly, and inside a space that's sterner and more demanding than any Barbara Astman has explored in the past. It will be very interesting to see where this gifted, inventive artist goes from here.



Globe and Mail, Tibor Kolley

Barbara Astman with a piece from Settings for Situations: a jeweller's precision and a designer's eye for effect.