

# CHELSEA CLINTON NEWS

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## Avoiding Definition, Artwork Elicits Emotion

*Stern's sculptures leave the viewer pleased — and somewhat unsettled*

BY MORGAN SEARL

Effectual art should tickle the viewer somewhere between logical thinking and spiritual faith. The place between these is something closer to gut instinct, or as Melissa Stern would define it, her dream world.

Stern's collection of works, "Birdland: Birds and Men," presented by Paul Bridgewater, previewed Feb. 8 to Feb. 11. It is both sculpture and collage that work together in an expression as powerful as it is indefinable.

Stern manages to successfully ruffle the viewer into the proclamation, "I like it," and then add, "I'm not sure why."

Walking into the gallery, one is immediately drawn to the installation at the end of the room. A garden of 600 bright-red poppies seems to grow out of the concrete slab floor in a field of dirt. Interspersed between the flowers are plaster statues of bird-like men or men-like birds ranging in size from 8 inches to 4 feet tall.

Each one is different: some are sitting, some are standing, some have nails for hair, some have Big Bird-style rings around their feet. They all

have creepy glass eyeballs that Stern said were acquired from a taxidermist and each of their beaks is unique. Upon closer inspection the only thing that makes these birds resemble men is their posture; otherwise, they each have the apparent anatomy of a bird. Walking around this work gives the impression that you are both the viewer and the viewed. The bird-like creatures appear to be watching you with the same interest as you are watching them; like walking through a zoo only to realize that you are the caged animal. This installation ties the show together and appears to be the culmination of the works that precede it in the gallery.

Stern's collage pieces that adorn the front of the gallery, at first glance, seem to be done hastily. The white, gessoed backgrounds show large, quick strokes and the fore-



In one installation, Melissa Stern creates a "garden" of bird-men that gives the impression of being both the viewer and the viewed.

grounds often resemble the angry scribbles of a child combined with colorful, glossy magazine cut-outs. However, Stern's work is not to be underestimated just as a child's work is not to be overlooked. Often there is the

truest kernel of expression in the Crayola scribbles of an elementary school classroom; at that age the feeling is not filtered through societal formalities, nor is it edited for understandable content. Stern has managed to capture the innate

truth of expression that most of us conceal with adulthood.

An example of this is in her work titled "Yellow Bellied Sapsucker." It is a collage piece that depicts glossy cut-outs of birds that are housed

see SCULPTURES page 18

## Stern's Sculptures Leave Viewers Pleased

continued from page 1

in a drawn tree. One branch extends outward and a stick-figured man is hanging—what looks like in jeep-

also brings to mind the ephemeral quality of life.

Stern tends to evade defining herself with an artist's statement; her methods of creation are more impul-

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ardly—into the open white space. This piece is compelling because it looks like a place we have all been—not literally, but metaphorically. Stern's ability to elicit that recognition of emotion in a viewer is why her art is successful.

Another outstanding work in this show is titled "Common Merganser." Using the same collage materials, the work depicts a serene and colorful lake with floating ducks. This scene is framed by strokes of white gesso and there are bird-like men walking in and out of the colorful frame. The parts of them that are in the frame are colored and the parts that aren't are black and white. There is something sorrowful in their inability to maintain color once they have left the frame, as if their life were somehow dependent on conforming to the limits of this drawn box. It

sive. Knowing that some of her favorite artists are the German World War II-influenced Max Beckman and the somewhat disturbed Basquiat explains a lot about her work. She seems to create intuitively and this, in turn, elicits an intuitive response from her audience. Were she to clearly define her intentions with words nailed onto paper, she would kill the viewers' ability to enjoy her art. She would not allow us the possibility of bringing our own meaning to her creations, which would be counterproductive. Just as her audience may shrug when asked why they like her work, Stern may not have a logical explanation for making it. But we're glad she did.

This exhibit will appear next as a solo exhibition in the David Lusk Gallery in Memphis, Tenn.