

Artist's Mixed Bag Full

By Richard Huntington

Right up front in the brain directly behind the eyeballs there is a small and, until recently, unused button that would, if pushed, send delicious pleasure through body and soul. This, for lack of a better name, might be called the "decorative button."

It's been mostly dormant these last six or seven decades while most of modern art and architecture have progressively stripped us of patterns, rich surfaces and the busy interplay of light-hearted color. Only lately, with the resurgence of interest in decorative painting, has it been activated once again.

Wayne Franklin, who currently is showing paintings and constructions at the Burchfield Center, is interested — obsessed maybe — with the decorative. His paintings especially are loaded with colorful incident, and there's barely a breathing space between paint strokes, cut-out shapes, feathers, and various kinds of shiny and glittery material that crowd their surfaces.

I don't mean this perjoratively, but I can see Franklin as a kind of mad decorator; an artist who if set loose without his art would instinctively start filling any dull, blank space within his reach with his jubilant shapes. There is, I think, a high-energy machine behind this art that is perpetually churning and chugging away, and its power turns Franklin's decorative impulse into a peculiar kind of expressionism, noisy but relieved of any cosmic dimension.

Take the painting called "I'm Not Sure Who Was Telling Who To Do What But I Could Do It All Night" (Franklin's titles are all long and humorous with no connection with the art). Here, shimmering green trian-

gles nose around a grayish-purple central shape which seems to be trying to hold onto its vaguely triangular identity. The central shape wobbles up towards a corner, carrying its cargo of tannish oblongs decked out in slivers of foil paper. All is set on a field of delectable orange made up of the same inquisitive oblongs.

As in the other paintings, "I'm Not Sure..." is enclosed by a floppy extension of canvas all around, a soft, free-form frame that is the reversal of the hard precision of the standard frame. The "frame," with its off-handed marks and loops, is the comic foil for the drama going on in the interior. If we imagined this painting as a piece of music, we'd probably hear a couple of kazooes tooting around the edges of the central theme.

Another painting, this one called "She Is My Favorite, This Is Her Favorite and I Want Your Money," has an aggressively comic book flavor with its red and yellow background overlaid with segments of dye-pinks topped with shredded piles of silver foil. Into this harsh scheme, Franklin introduces the contrary elements of what could be imitated pieces of a sweet, rosey sunset found in romantic landscape painting. All the contrary

elements are so absorbed by the overall movement of the painting that we hardly think of them as in the least foreign.

In a like manner, when things get overall too languid or sweet, Franklin makes color clatter loudly or makes shapes do acrobatics in order that they might hold their own within a raucous pattern. Off-handed drawing — often random scribbles, in fact — or the feathers that appear pasted in many of the paintings, are given the necessary persuasive visual weight by being banged against big, swinging loops or forced to take unexpected spatial leaps. The paintings are marvelous assemblages of false starts and delayed conclusions, which finally somehow wind up with a fair amount of reasonableness of structure to them — but never at the expense of their natural explosive joy.

This kind of perverse interplay of opposites works well in Franklin's paintings, but the constructions, with their concrete presence, are another story. In these works, the artists has yet to find a way to combine his vigorous arsenal of forms with the way he puts the pieces together physically. The mock-casualness of paintings becomes mere carelessness in the busy constructions and the deployment of the rickety forms destroys any intended interaction of color and brushstroke. Also, the hedgewalk arrangement of these constructions within the room is, to my eye, a needless effort to make a basically object-oriented art into environmental art.

The paintings, however, are a joy and more than make up for the weaknesses of the sculpture. The show will continue Sept. 20. The Burchfield Center, located on Buffalo State Campus, is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.