

ENTERTAINMENT

Burchfield Center

Exhibit Fails Two Talented Artists

By ANTHONY BANNON

News Critic

Perhaps there's a concept a-wind between the two rooms of the Burchfield Center, one holding a monotonous repetition of portraits by Susan Read, the other the wild and turgid constructions of Suzann Phelan Denny.

Perhaps the concept is that of a mistake. Because both women are fine, respected artists, though neither is well-served here.

Read's portraits — both drawings and frescos — are all full-face, full-body views, and there are many, many, many of them.

Her people, mostly children, sit in chairs with hands on laps, mostly folded. Rather than through the faces, which generally have the same shape, one reads these portraits through styles of chairs — cane versus low-backed, for instance — and through dress — farmer's bib versus formal riding wear.

The subjects include academic and community leaders, drawn warmly and with compassion, but set flatly against neutral backgrounds in a formality reminiscent of American primitive work.

Read's art, certainly, has a meaning special to the paintings' owners and perhaps to the extended family of their social group, yet, I'd

suspect, they have far less significance to a general audience unfamiliar with the art network that supports and valorizes Read's portrait style.

It is interesting art, with an idiosyncratic signature, that may require the surreality of time to paint fully the ironies possible to it. One thing is sure, the time-honored medium of fresco will endure.

Suzann Phelan Denny's fine drawings, often mixes of acrylic

and pencil, are whimsical, wistful instances of fancy and manner. I remember with etched clarity a spindly legged doe grazing on a window sill observed by two donkeys that peer around the lace window curtains — the impossible whole given a light grid of formality that could be picket fence or play shadow. It was in an "In Western New York" show at the Albright-Know.

Color was applied separately, as if it had no relationship with line, each asserting their own priority, yet both challenging the picture's rational sensibilities.

Denny here presents three drawings of flowers, each emerging from a tangle of leaf and mysterious ground, that are wonderful. Next to them is "Outburst," a cascade of the shapes that comprised the flowers, yet unconforming to any representation. The whole, then, is overridden with a splatter of paint. It is an emotional augur of her constructions.

From a distance, the constructions can appear as a density of texture and shape, an abstract, highly expressionistic mass pulled into a third dimension.

Closer, though, they are a gravid assortment of highly charged connotative objects that by rights

should explode in each other's presence.

Placing together symbolic signs such as a pressed rose, animal bones, bird feathers (even whole wings), broken glass, prisms, art-making tools such as brushed and pencils, a child's block imprisoned in a chemical retort, other toys, etc., is like making poems about God, love, the soul and art using only sibilant sounds.

It's too much, especially with titles the likes of Wings and Prayers, Abdication, Rite of Passage.

The work drips with emotional possibilities, yelling its meaning in such close quarters that the sounds of some words are muffled in the roar, and one leaves it, assaulted, uninvited to participate in the communication.

The pleasure in Denny's work has been a delight in the disjunction, the gaps between expectation, experience and delivery — those great points of synapse where true exchange takes place. No one should want the artist to routinely continue in a rutted passage; one can hope, however, that the principle of discovery between artist and audience continues.

The exhibits continue through April 18 in the center, located in Buffalo State College Rockwell Hall

BEN 3/25/80