

Time, Study Required At Anonima Art Exhibit

By ELLEN JANSON

The Anonima show at the Fleming Museum is one show that is two shows by three artists who have worked as one. Confused? Look to the word "anonymous" for a clue.

The exhibition, running through Thanksgiving, is about the Anonima group and where its three members stand now.

Was I naive enough to believe that an hour was sufficient to enjoy it? Not quite—for I had expected it to be a feast from the moment I saw the paintings spread over the museum floor. The new show promised to be big, full of variety, first rate.

Its language was hard edge abstraction of our time.

Lines, strips, squares and grids were set with precision. Planes, light and surfaces changed optically. Color was primary and intense, or cool, subtle and elusive.

I noticed groups of large pictures: a tiny sketch, probably a key to a set; many drawings, some spare, some dense; smallish paintings of the same size; a stack of prints related to the diagram that had been mailed as the show's announcement. But I suspected that looking and digging were due if I was to get an inkling of what it was all about.

Pictures did not seem difficult. If anything, they looked free of obscurity. Yet even after the show was hung, when groups became apparent, a walk through the galleries raised more questions than it answered.

Digging meant facing Anonima's catalog, a document in microscopic print, formidable, finicky, badly edited.

Try to read it. The artists' joint statements are to the point. Understanding what they were up to is basic to this particular show.

Then you won't get discouraged looking for experiences that aren't intended. Knowing the artists' purpose, you may be impressed by the blunt way they've faced their work, without hedging or tricks of style. You may be impressed by their control.

Anonima begins in 1960, when three artists agreed to turn from abstract expressionism, the style of the "art world." They wanted to paint pictures that had thought behind them, and seeking a path, looked backward "through Mondrian. . . to the earlier European traditions of geometric and constructivist painting."

Ed Mieszkowski and Ernest Benkert, who are now just over 40, still live in New York.

Mieszkowski teaches painting at Cleveland Institute. Benkert teaches art history at Pratt.

Frank Hewitt, 35, quit Cooper Union last year to teach painting at UVM, happy to be able to take his family to their land in Corinth more often. The show is his doing.

They met in art school and after graduate work in the midwest, ended up in New York. Feeling disgusted and trapped by the hassle of turning out "avant-grade" pictures for a commercial market, they decided to stay clear of it.

They agreed to exhibit together, and hoped their enforced isolation would lead to something positive. The list of exhibitions that the group was invited into shows they weren't ignored.

Their interests focused on perception, how the eye and brain communicate. They discovered that the "theory and data of perceptual psychology" came to be "relevant and useful" to their work.

They restricted their pictures to a single fact of perception for a year at a time.

1966 was the year of the square—the reason for all the two-foot pictures in the show.

A Hewitt contribution to the 1967 study, a perceptual inquiry into Overlap, is illustrated.

1968 was devoted to Relative-Size-Change; 1969 to Brightness-Ratio.

After you identify pictures in each category, compare the attack by three individuals.

A New York visitor feels one tackled the restrictions with the coolness of a classicist, one with the romantic's involvement, and the third as a sensualist.

All have moved from such restrictions onto more personal and intuitive ground.

Hewitt, in love with Vermont, collects dirt from its four corners. He grinds, binds it, as painters prepared their brown paint 150 years ago, then spreads it across a huge canvas to symbolize man's bond to earth, which living here has made clear to him.

Benkert's immaculate drawings grew out of Size-Change. They unfold before you and become transparent.

At Mieszkowski's pictures, I can only shake my head in wonder. They expand and invite my eye to rove through dimensions I never suspected a painting could contain.

Really, to begin enjoying Anonima, you need only time and a genuine wish to meet the artists halfway.