

Perlman's hermetic fantasies

A years-long project realized

By Alan G. Artner
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You can take the artist out of Chicago, but you can't take Chicago out of the artist.

That thought was immediately prompted by Hirsch Perlman's elaborate, years-long photo project excerpted at the Donald Young Gallery, for the artist, who now lives in Los Angeles, has created as obsessive and hermetic a piece as any of the fantasy paintings done by Chicagoans while Perlman grew to maturity on the North Shore.

Every stage of the project, from the making of a primitive pinhole camera to the building of subjects and printing of images, has been carried out by Perlman himself over a period of three years. Each day of that time he photographed, later adding to each print, as if it were a title, the day and number of the image in that day's sequence.

Thus far, this may sound more systematic than fantastic, though the stranger turn becomes evident in Perlman's subjects: figures built from cardboard and other packing materials. These the artist created and photographed, then reassembled into ever-larger and less easily apprehensible figures that eventually metamorphose into a huge disembodied



Hirsch Perlman's elaborate, years-long project excerpted at the Donald Young Gallery consists of photos of figures he built from cardboard and other packing materials.



head, like a shaggy remnant of a parade or Venetian carnival.

The process took place in a room of Perlman's house, which appears in the photographs like a studio that gradually becomes more littered. As the figures may suggest Constructivist robots that gradually get out of hand, so does the space imperceptibly take on a sinister character. Because of Perlman's earlier works on interrogations, there also is the inevitable association — occasionally furthered by images in which the figure is hanging — with prisoners or hostages.

No narrative emerges from the 57 pictures Perlman has mounted on vinyl sheets with push pins around three walls of Young's largest gallery. The pictures are, however, in two sizes, and those in the bigger format have been digitally manipulated to bring out imperfections in the negatives. This sometimes gives them the character of worn documents recording some kind of performance or ritual rather than straight studio shots akin to the famous ones by sculptor Constantin Brancusi.

Indeed, whatever photographic antecedents they call up appear to be serendipitous, for Perlman is not interested in

commenting on other works in the medium.

His is very much an *isolated* venture, carried on apart from the history of any art form, as if by an untutored or outsider artist. A good deal of its strangeness comes from how well it communicates this sense because, of course, Perlman is not a primitive nor is he self-consciously pretending to be one. He's merely going his own way, which was a tendency highly prized in the work of an earlier generation of Chicago artist.

At 933 W. Washington Blvd., through March 16; 312-455-0100.