

John Abrams: installation at ARC, 1985. Photo: courtesy Garnet Press.

FREEZE-DRIED

OZ

"Outside Elsewhere"
ARC
Toronto

This group show of environmental installations by Adly Gawad, Andrew O1, John Abrams and Runt is marked by artistic control over the 'alienness' of a personal vision and its expression as a reality. The four environments created are little universes which have been expanded and explored, sometimes wistfully, sometimes uncomfortably, to reveal death wishes and nightmares, the schizophrenic and the exotic, the psychedelic, the fantastic, a contracted universe, and the kind of paranoid delerium that is associated with urban terror.

Runt's work is distinguished by the black humour and lyrical sense of disassociation and despair that usually characterizes the 'Head Comic'. Its cartoon personalities are on the rampage in dizzying city slumscapes like ur-



Adly Gawad: installation at ARC, 1985. Photo: courtesy the artist.

ban dinosaurs from the Plasticine Era. The cosmopolitan 'follies' of his freakish and poison-fried characters are charred by a nihilistic, fatalistic sensibility which explodes in a 'nuke-burst' of aggressive oranges, reds and yellows that is pure Id. In *Around the Corner Bleep* a long shadowy body painted directly

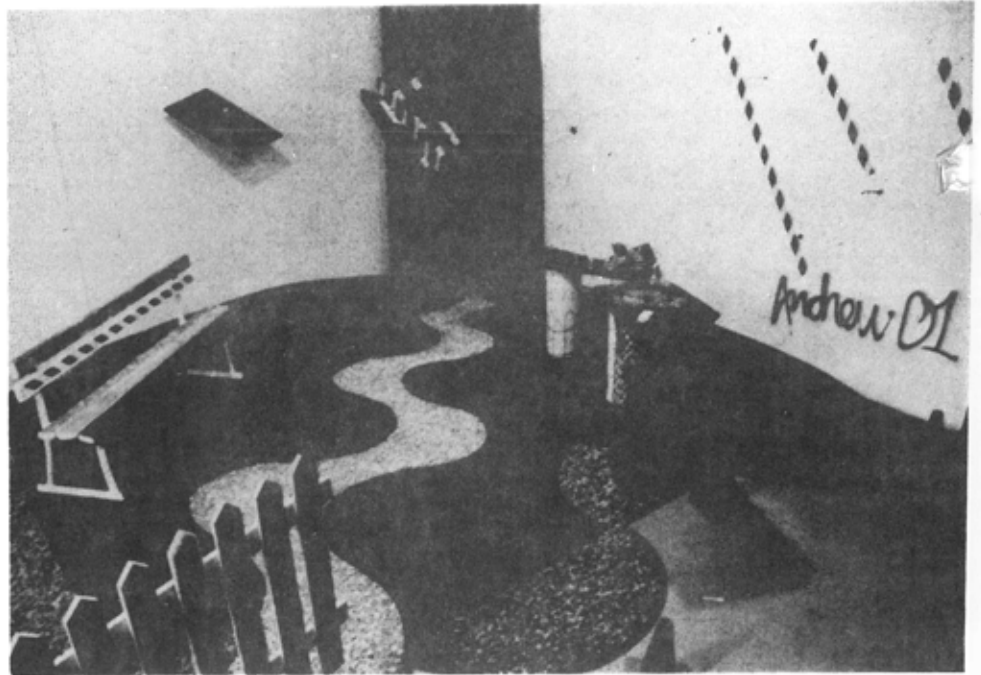
on the wall of the gallery extends over the south and west walls, and a small, speckled, slightly brain-damaged looking pup wanders into the Jaws of Fate — the yawning grill of a buck-toothed jalopy with a looney-tune leer. Runt's lurid scenarios are filled with bad omens: black, vacant thought balloons loom forth like the shadowy bodies of a former state of rationality (like a lesson in linguistics signifying nothing), and degenerate party-goers on a sinking ship in a polluted harbour are depicted going to their fate with the 'auto-mania' of those who must dance today 'for we die tomorrow'. The narratives in Runt's work must often take the form of one 'personality' ingesting another in a 'dog-eat-dog' world. These cataclysms take place among a polyphony of details; the clattering of cans, the honking of horns, the sizzle of brain cells frying, and the putt-putting of cars souped up with negative personality traits in a vigorous style that can only be described as 'Hanna Bar-

baric'. Like the Symbolist poet Rimbaud, or filmmaker John Waters, Runt exalts in the 'beauty of the wart', in the celebration of the aberration, the abomination and the terror of disorientation, and within the context of his cartoons he takes that which is indigestible (terror, repulsion, existentialism), and makes it digestible, though not necessarily palatable, to the viewer, depending on your sense of humour.

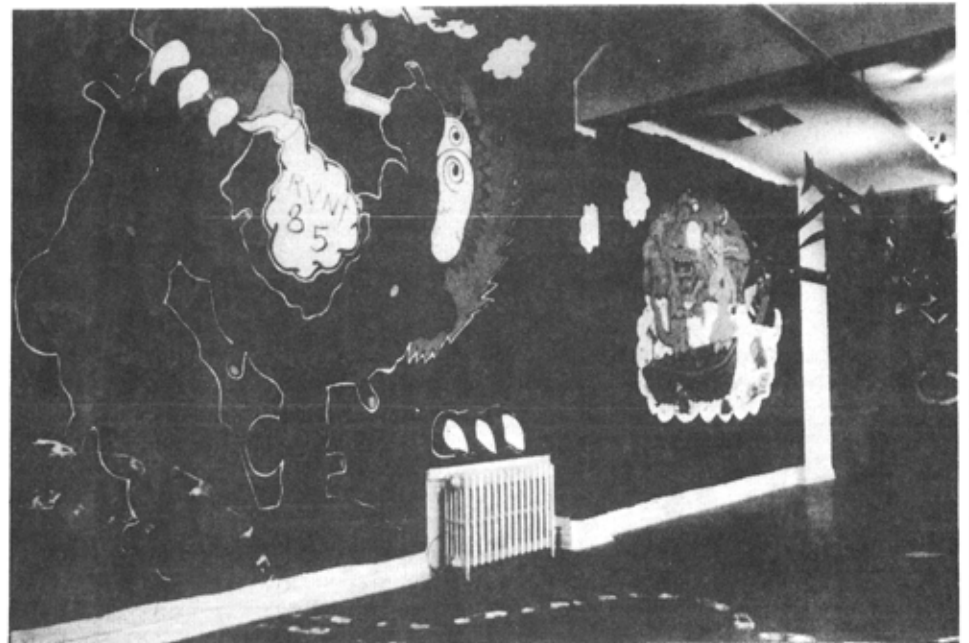
Adly Gawad's installation is an example of collage work worthy of Marshall McLuhan's catch phrase: 'Instant Cubism'. Eight by eight inch tiles vivisect an image sodden with dreamy decay; a place possessed by the fluidity of mirrors, an oriental style serenity, and the influence of Matisse. There is a predominance of black, brown and silver, a decorative palm tree, and graceful little stencils of fish. The 'David Hockney effect' of the overlapping tiles make Gawad's environment slightly hallucinatory because it is not focussed on any specific image. Tiles are strewn along the floor, as if they had dropped from the face of some archaic mosaic, and in the midst of these fragments sits the highly stylized cardboard image of a woman with a pot of unhealthy looking poinsettias and daisies at her feet. This organic and meditative atmosphere is disturbed by the insidious presence of about thirty cardboard arrows suspended from the ceiling, each emblazoned with a red eye, directed in a funnel-like formation at the seated woman. Like Runt, Gawad's environment is slightly damaged and consists of elements which make reference to a portending doom. Gawad's seated woman is menaced by the insidious camouflage of the perverse and the more morose aspects of reality which shatter the ideal into fragments.

John Abrams' figurative representation of a headless beached whale, stretching across half a long wall, is (in a literary sense) like the wish for the fantastic or epic event. Against a painted mural depicting the sea, Abrams' wooden whale is set into a bed of sand like an oversized lawn ornament, around which sea gulls strut like life-size lawn ornaments. This installation is a naive and storybook depiction of one of the greatest myths, the whale washed upon the beach, yet there is something perverse about the way the mass of deep steel gray whale blubber is amputated at the head by the edges of the installation like something on a conveyor belt at a fish cannery. This conspicuous omission of the whale's head is an insidious element in a work so large. The installation succeeds in overwhelming the viewer with a wall of flesh, and an interesting parallel can be drawn there, between the magnitude of that event, and the 'smallness' of trying to realize it. Abrams' lawn ornament approach is a direct attempt to study this irony. Most experiences are not of this epic nature, but of a banal, everyday nature. But it only takes the simplest and most wistful of references to refer to an imagination larger than that of the immediate possibilities of reality.

Andrew O1's installation is granulated and crystallized; a kind of 'freeze-dried' Oz which has been zapped into graceful space-age trapezoids and triangles. O1's yellow brick road, drained by lengths of green garden hose, meanders into a piece of plywood on which the sky has been frottaged with blue paint. The park along the way is decorated with a mis-



Andrew O1: installation at ARC, 1985. Photo: courtesy the artist.



Runt: installation at ARC, 1985. Photo: courtesy the artist.

aligned park bench mac-tacked with utilitarian plastics; the grass is astro-turf, into which are set orange pylons, colourful wire and borg constructions, and four monuments supporting small scale models of surrealistic scenes involving plastic doll furniture, cars, cows, space-men and a miniature rock garden. O1's installation plays with the more frightening aspects of relativity; the unity in the piece relies on the disassociation of microcosm and macrocosm, and on the hallucinatory resemblance between artifice and nature. O1's dreamscape is fascinating and poisonous. The beauty of his environment relies on the 'alienness' of his materials (borg, plastics, coloured gravel and wire): these are the psyche-

delic elements that construct his garden.

An interesting aspect of this group show is that all four artists have collaborated to have their installations meet in the centre of the gallery in a four-pointed dervish. White footprints from plebian running shoes track across the face of Runt's mural and meet Gawad's tiles, a sprinkling of sand from Abrams' installation and gravel from O1's 'garden'. All four artists have not only embraced the more alien aspects of their own personal visions, they have also, in a way, embraced the work of each other.

Donna Lypchuk