

Bringing the Art of Plastics Into Focus

By Thomas Willis

Milwaukee

● EVERY WORK of art, in a way, is a lens. It focuses attention. Thru it we see things differently. Objects change relationships. Some lenses—and art works—create images behind themselves, forcing us to look around, thru, or behind them to grasp the shifting realities. Some, like the bowl of a spoon, suspend their reflected images between themselves and the observer. We reach out to touch them, knowing our eyes provide no firm point of reference. Space, for the observer of the moment, has been conquered.

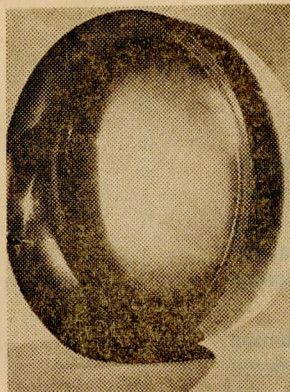
All of which may explain at least part of the power of DeWain Valentine's "Untitled—Concave Circle," which is to my way of thinking the runaway hit of the Milwaukee Art center's adventurous and ex-

asperating current exhibit, "A Plastic Presence."

"Plastic" is such a loaded word. Merely uttering it is enough to send some of us into anti-industrial or anti-commercial tirades. Anyone who has cut a finger on a supermarket package or assembled a child's car model carries away deep-seated psychological resentment. The ultra-gloss finish of some vinyls has acquired a superficiality exceeding the thinnest veneer. The plastic universe abounds in negative superlatives—everything seems too strong, too thin, too shiny, too blunted, too gooey, too abundant, too detailed, and so on.

Mr. Valentine's lens—and to a lesser extent the best of the rest of the exhibit—puts all of this excess baggage in perspective. If plastic belongs to all of us, these works seem to say, let's do the best we can to find its inner poetry and logic.

"Concave Circle" just sits



Valentine's concave circle.

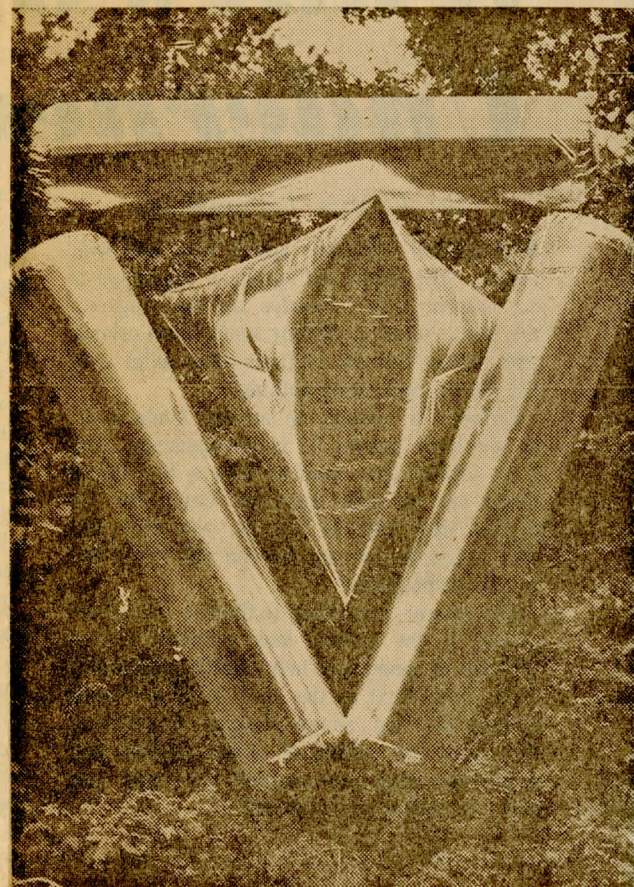
there on its pedestal, a solid chunk of cast resin, 6 feet high and 2 feet thick. Positioned by the center's expert installers directly in the flow of traffic, it transmits the shapes of those in front to those behind. The image is not inverted as in a magnifying glass—those across

the way are right side up and easily recognized—but they are nonetheless changed. The virtual forms are two-dimensional and almost monochromatic. Thru this artist's glass, the world is not rose-colored, but mauve.

Many of the other pieces also exploit surface properties and optical effect. A Louise Nevelson executed in Plexiglass loses its boxy quality and becomes a playful extravaganza of light lines. Leo Rabkin's shadow box and Leroy Lamis' "Construction 184" are equally dependent on optical geometry. Peter Kolisnyk's "Refractor No. 1" exerts some of Mr. Valentine's environmental force as it divides the room into smokey planes.

The rest is variously effective, with vacuous vacuform, gummy globs, pseudo-intestinal enlargements, multi-dimensional shower curtains, and billowing pillows predominant. Vera Simons' laminated plastic "Phoron" is a sort of mobile in reverse; its silvered, helium-filled cylinders swing, not from the ceiling, but from the floor. Roger Shipley's "Pictorial Participation No. 15" works mirror tricks within a colorful clock face. Richard Van Buren's wall of discarded fiberglass pelts—55 in all—are the saddest and most spiritless of all. This, too, is probably intentional. No one, after all, expects artists to be unfailing optimists.

"A Plastic Presence" was assembled by the center with the aid of Philip Morris, Inc., and its affiliated companies—Miller Brewing company and Milpraint, Inc. It will remain here until March 8, when it moves to the San Francisco museum.



Vera Simons' "Phoron" in laminated plastic.



Susan Lewis Williams stands in her vinyl "Cylinder Room."