

There is an ebullience in Phyllis Mark's brightly painted, wind-activated environmental sculptures, yet they are also serious explorations of color, kinetics, systemic design relationships, and the psychology of perception.

Five works from the newest series are currently on public view. *Land Sail*, at Hofstra University, Long Island, and *Lawn Peacock*, at the Muscarelle Museum, College of William and Mary, remain until next fall; *Color Fugue* and *Red Tumble*, competition winners at Montgomery College, Maryland, remain there until July; *Pyramid Butterfly*, the most recent work, will be at Fordham Law School, New York, until the fall of 1986. The latter piece, completed earlier this year, incorporates a number of the artist's previous ideas, but goes still further in its concepts of specifically relating the composition to the location.

The contour of the site's fixed courtyard platform, a stepped pyramid, was used as inspiration for the sculpture's graduated aluminum slats. The resulting design configuration calls attention to the importance of geometric modules in Mark's art. The central composition, however, is a painted one that emphasizes double bursts of color (turquoise, green, and earth tones) with the appearance of crisp rays expanding outward from a middle core. Their visual strength, underscored by diagonal white highlight stripes, allows direction, design, and pattern to become the dominant elements. A 9½-foot steel supporting frame is painted in a brick tone to intentionally blend into the background buildings and allow the three main sections to have an unfettered, loose effect.

A merging of the concerns of sculpture with those of painting is important in *Pyramid Butterfly*. Rhythmic pattern repetitions in the painted composition have the power to stimulate illusions of movement. They are intellectually controlled abstractions, closely related to systemic painting. Shapes and colors seem to move, testing the eye, and there are after-images, focus demands, and deliberately unresolved tension.

Color is used as both physical sensation and structure, with tones and their juxtapositions carefully chosen to develop

distinctive optical suggestions. (Originally a painter, Mark had found herself cutting and adding forms to canvas before she turned to sculpture.)

The assertive, radiating abstract shapes evolve from extensive preparatory drawings. Studied in black and white, the systems make one think of Buckminster Fuller, idealized geometry, physics, and engineering. Such regimented schemes contrast quite deliberately with the sculpture's fluctuating, irregular motion.

The work's greatest significance can be found in the way it invites a viewer's lengthy engagement with the constantly changing image. Propelled by the wind, the three panels revolve unpredictably, with Mark's bold geometrics creating a kaleidoscopic kind of optical drama. New formal relationships appear, move away, then reappear in still other mutations.

Mark's commitment to kinetics is a long one, going back to a point in the mid-'60s when she first began using motors to program her gleaming metal constructions. It was not an interest in movement for its own sake, but rather a search for a device that would expand the number of image relationships possible for a particular piece. Both the early and the later works are characterized by angular, linear forms that direct the eye swiftly. In addition, there has always been a tendency to develop simple, sign-like forms that seem iconic.

Shifting from machine to wind propulsion was a major step for Mark, for it meant relinquishing control to weather variables. Now there is an element of chance: a piece might be comparatively still, then flicker gently, then become extremely restless. The emotional pull on the viewer is actually stronger, and the sense of participation more direct.

In *Color Fugue* and *Land Sail*, earlier pieces in this environmental series, a vertical slat format was used as the design surface. When activated by the wind, the resulting rippling and bowing seems to imply a greater sense of randomness, transience, and improvisation. The newest work, on the other hand,

is weightier and more complicated, yet it manages to be exceedingly graceful.

Background elements, seen through the sculpture's frame structure, are also a source of changing perceptions for the viewer. Seasonal variations in foliage play their role, of course, but some spectacular interactions can also be produced by adjacent sun-drenched buildings. At Fordham, the narrower open areas of the graduated-length, aluminum slat configuration bring in architectural details of modern apartment buildings neighboring the plaza, and a vast number of rectangular steel window frames contrast with the sculpture's lively diagonal lines. These surrounding structures have a way of tunneling the wind from the nearby Hudson River (the artist took this channeled turbulence into consideration during the planning stages).

The element of chance carries with it the excitement of discovery. Herein lies the key to

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Mark's attitude toward public art, for she seems to want her audience to experience a joyous kind of discovery, and to use it as a route to involvement. Certainly the work encourages an initial feeling of playfulness and delight. There is even a great deal to remind us of brightly painted, simplified objects that were invented to stimulate the imaginations of young spirits.

Mark rather provocatively blends an open and joyous public art philosophy with a keen interest in precisionist, scientific schemes. When her drawings and maquettes are shown at Fordham University in late 1985, they should provide useful insights into her ideas and their evolution. (Fordham University at Lincoln Center, *through September 1986*)

Phyllis Braff



Phyllis Mark,
Pyramid Butterfly, 1985. Fordham
University at Lincoln Center, New York.