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'Happenstance'

By HOLLAND COTTER

Harris Lieberman

89 Vandam Street, at Hudson Street, South Village

Through Jan. 21

Lauri Firstenberg -- former curator at Artists Space and present director of LaxArt, a contemporary center opening in Los Angeles next month -- has gathered a choice pick of bicoastal talent for this show. As the title implies, there's no governing premise. But all the work shares a Conceptual bent, and much of it is committed to an odd but productive marriage of sculpture and photography.

In some cases, the links among all three are direct. The Los Angeles artist Shana Lutker makes tabletop sculptures based on her dreams, photographs them and then exhibits the pictures, smudging the line between "document" and "art." For "Untitled (Broken Baccarat)," Lisa Tan dropped a lead glass crystal from a second-story window, recovered the minimally damaged object, photographed it and displayed both it and the photograph, like relics of a miracle.

Geography as destiny is one of the show's subthemes. Terry Chatkupt recreates the Midwest landscape of his childhood in a video shot in Maine. The very interesting Arthur Ou, born in Taipei and raised in Southern California, explores the visual slipperiness of ethnicity: he documents fading examples of decorative chinoiserie found in homes in Taiwan owned by Japanese.

Ruben Ochoa and Amir Zaki take Los Angeles as their subject. Mr. Ochoa inserts enlarged photographs of graffiti-covered freeway walls in ramp-shaped frames to transport a slice of down-market urban life to an upscale gallery. Mr. Zaki shows three photographs of a Los Angeles landslide, one of which is actually a spatially illogical photo-collage. That you can't tell the difference at first has a lot to say about Mr. Zaki's surreal hometown.

From Rodney McMillian comes the ghost of a house in the form a found carpet hung on the gallery wall. Soiled, smelly and with one corner cut out, it's like a cross between a Minimalist painting -- early Robert Mangold -- and a map of the United States. Home is history, or maybe the other way around, for Leslie Hewitt, one of the stars of "Frequency" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in her photographic series "Riffs on Real Time." Each piece in the series is a photograph of a collage; each collage is composed of a family snapshot or Civil Rights-era image centered on a sheet of paper covered with handwritten notes and lists. The paper itself appears to be taped to the wall of a kitchen or basement rec room; the setting changes from piece to piece. Although the work gives the impression that the artist came across the collages by chance and shot them where found, there is nothing haphazard about this meticulously thought-through and felt-through art.

By contrast, chance is the essence of contributions by the Los Angeles-born, New York-based Michael Queenland, whether in a photograph of a lethal supermarket still life or in the installation called "Standing Brooms Until All or None Fall Over." The latter consists of a plywood platform on which, just before the show opened, the artist placed 12 household brooms upright but unsupported, brush-end down. Ambient motion and gravity are the active variables here. An earth-shaking truck rumbles past the gallery, a broom falls with a bang. Only two were still standing when I visited two weeks ago. They're surely all down by now. And down they will stay, monuments to **happenstance**, till the end of the show. HOLLAND COTTER

Photos: Left, Ruben Ochoa's "Borrowed Ladder," far left, and "Standing Brooms Until All or None Fall Over," an installation by Michael Queenland. Above, a selection from Leslie Hewitt's series "Riffs on Real Time." (Photographs courtesy of Harris Lieberman, New York)