

The Gallery Goer

Beth Swartz—

Master of the Controlled Accident

Those who equate women and watercolor with weakness are in for a pleasant surprise at the Janna Gallery, Danubio 139, on the corner of Lerma, just behind the Hotel María Isabel Sheraton. Here an artist from Phoenix, Arizona, Beth Ames Swartz, is showing her latest work. And there is in her use of this delicate medium a grace with guts, a power with poetry which is as unexpected as it is delightful. For all too often watercolor is mangled by the "greenery-yallery" mish-mash of the amateur.

There is nothing of the amateur about these often brilliantly colored, always gay and sprightly fantasies and inventions by Beth Ames Swartz. Her approach is always professional. For, although she induces her original design by means of the controlled accident, dripping, rubbing, scratching the painted surface and freely accepting the result of chance, she never commits the weakness of falling possessively in love with the achieved result — which often has its own particular charm. Instead she boldly sets to work with poetic sensitivity to uncover the latent visual images buried in the abstract pattern upon her paper. This is a kind of alchemy in which the artist changes one level of image into another more meaningful one, at the same time treading a delicate path between total abstraction and a subtle reference to visual reality.

Side by side with his strictures to seek order through calculation, Leonardo da Vinci, in his Notebooks, urges young painters to seek scenes of disorder from which to deduce fanciful and imaginative images. He tells them to look at "walls stained with damp or at stones of uneven color or the glowing embers of a fire or clouds or mud or other similar objects from which they will find most admirable ideas — because from the confusion of shapes the creative spirit is quickened to new inventions."

This is precisely the method Beth Ames Swartz employs for her improvisations. Using every device of modern paint technology she produces Leonardo's "confusion of shapes" which in turn invariably contain implications which spur her creativity to fresh discoveries. Sometimes these controlled accidents reflect the sparkle of a jewelled insect, at others the depths we glimpse of stones at the bottom of a running stream or the tangled configurations gained by gazing close up at growing plants.

Scale and ambiguity also become a powerful weapon in the hands of this artist. She combines objects of differing size into a single statement. Thus a mountain, a reclining woman and a layered ridge of rock become interchangeable. And it is this sense of miracle that Beth Ames Swartz shares with such nature writers as Richard Jefferies, who express certain fugitive sensations which are in fact the feeling of the harmonious intercommunication and "oneness" of everything and the feeling of the "soul" of things and phenomena.

But technical know-how, expertise and even a powerful innate sensitivity can carry an artist only so far.

The essential ingredient in all valid work is integrity and sincerity of purpose. Beth Ames Swartz has this integrity. She has this sincerity. And it is her most

PRICELESS POSSESSION

TOBY JOYSMITH
CRITIC MEXICO CITY NEWS
1970