

View new Segal

"CAUTION: ART!" at the Thomas Segal Gallery 207 South St., through Sept 11

By MARY SHERMAN

In 1959, a young Malden native painted a number of paintings, consisting of precise

black lines evenly spaced across a raw canvas. "What you see is what you see," the artist Frank Stella explained. Painterly effects, emotion, mood, recognizable imagery and, above all, depth were ruthlessly eliminated. Art was reduced to its bare essentials.

Thomas
Segal
Gallery

exhibit with 'CAUTION'

A lingering sense of that modernist legacy pervades bits and pieces of the work in the Thomas Segal Gallery's show, "CAUTION: ART!" But, on the whole, the works could not be more different. Here little if anything is what you see.

Everything refers to something else. In Mary McCallum's photographic diptych, "El Pan Desnudo, El Pan Vestido," ("The Nude Bread, The Clothed Bread") the size of the paintings, their Spanish title and the depiction of wrapped and unwrapped white bread wittlessly alludes to the Romantic painter Francisco Goya's two paintings of a reclining woman, "The Nude Maja" and "The Clothed Maja."

Norbert Puempel's painted phrase, "Und sie bewegt sich doch" ("And it is still moving") is a quote by astronomer Galileo Galilei. And Cindy Jackson's slickly painted and chically mounted images include reproductions of historic art icons.

The show's premise is to feature artists who either have not shown in the local area or, if they have, have not shown in such a prominent Boston setting. The work was selected for its "confrontational base, with each artist focusing on challenging issues that confront the social and political status quo."

Thus, Jo-Anne Green's badly lit, handmade book is filled with pictures of oppressed people. Both Puempel's bluntly painted formula for the hydrogen bomb and Gary Rattigan's sinister pictographs reveal how easily

unpleasant realities can be transformed into disturbing, abstract elegance. Adam Simon's croppings of actual newspaper clippings show how information is edited to create a semblance of "truth."

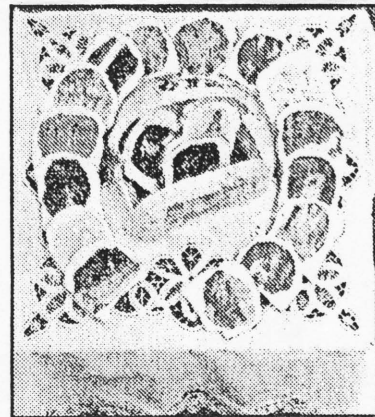
Meanwhile, Jackson's bland rendering of the classicist's J.A.D. Ingres' "Odalisque" placed above a painting of people looking up, McCallum's clumsy slices of painted bread covered with nudes from famous art works and, to a lesser extent, Nahum Zenil's haunting, combined religious and homoerotic imagery address the issue of nudity in art.

On the whole, except for Zenil's stunning works and the anxious line of Rattigan's schematic paintings, the works require unraveling their conceits like a parlor game. In some ways most works of art can be subjected to this pursuit.

A fine example is Edouard Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass," a picnic scene in which two dressed men join a nude woman in a picnic (conveniently reproduced on one of McCallum's slices of bread.) Manet's composition is derived from an engraving by the Renaissance artist Raphael, which is based on an early Roman carving.

Similarly the religious imagery in Zenil's painting is derived from a traditional Latin American iconography. The appeal of Zenil's works, like Manet's great painting, however, does not depend on knowing its precedents.

Neither's work can be reduced to a simplistic borrowing of other



BREAD SPREAD: Mary McCallum's 'The Censored Sarcophagus, of bread, gold leaf and laser prints, is on display at the Thomas Segal Gallery

images. Manet updated Raphael's work, dressing the figures in modern clothes, in part, to point out that painting is an artifice, a studio creation bearing little resemblance to reality. Moreover, his broad flat handling of paint brilliantly foreshadowed Stella's emphasis on purely formal effects.

That Manet used aspects of Raphael's composition is not the point of Manet's painting; instead, it is a point of departure, a point that led to a rich new image. In the same way, Zenil's brilliant use of conventional Christian symbols is not required knowledge to enjoy the work; it only enriches one's appreciation. Unfortunately, most of the works in the show do not match this fine feat. □