

Calm amid the waxed

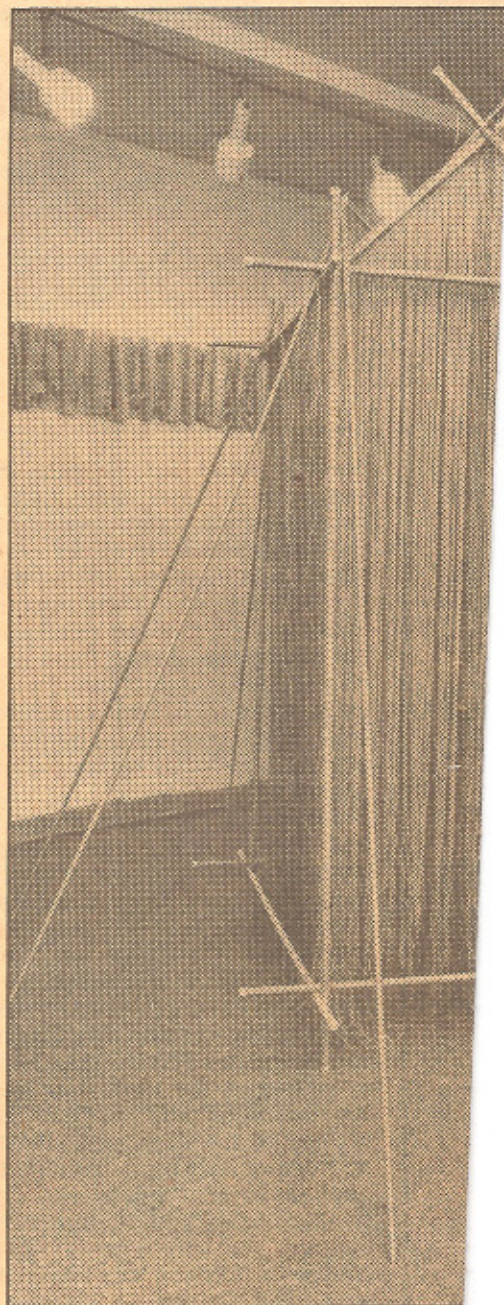
BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

JUNE, 1981, is turning out to be like most Junes in the busy Toronto commercial gallery circuit. The long season of shows which started with a great lurch forward last September is slowly running out of gas, and there won't be many big surprises in the city's private galleries — with at least one exception: the new Grunwald Gallery at 3221A Yonge Street. It is there, far from the beaten tracks of Yorkville and Queen Street West, that Dundas, Ont., artist An Whitlock, 37, has decided to make her quiet, very welcome reappearance on the Toronto art scene.

It has been seven years since Miss Whitlock's major one-woman exhibition at the Art Gallery of

Falls, Ont. Miss Whitlock's main artistic interest is now centred on such open-air installations; it is perhaps unfortunate that more of this kind of outside joy did not find its way into this show of gallery art.

But the show, as we have it, is full of evidence that Miss Whitlock's artistic interests have remained largely untouched by the passage of time. We find her still pressing her points about art's identity with our common life: her pieces celebrate the rough beauty of such working-class, non-art materials as waxed paper and industrial thread, barbed wire and tarred roofing paper. Now, as then, we see her meticulously assembling these unlikely stuffs into sculptural entities which, if any-



An Whitlock's newer mood is expressed

An Whitlock's mood has changed from scrawled outrage to deep resignation

Ontario (her most recent show in Toronto) and it's interesting to see the ways she's changed, and the ways she's not. We find a reminder of the past in the coils of barbed wire festooning her 15-foot-long horizontal row of black, vaginal pouches, thrusting out into the viewer's space, snatching at sleeves.

But in most of these pieces (a documentary work, four untitled sculptural installations and three rectangular works on paper), gallery-goers will find that Miss Whitlock's outrage, scrawled all over the earlier pieces, has turned into something approaching deep resignation.

This newer mood is well expressed by the two hut-like shrines made of long, pointed wooden spears — the frame of each little house stands 6½ feet high — which turn out to be centres of an almost funereal calm. At only one point in this deeply personal show do we find signs of free happiness: in the photo-documentation of a beautiful swinging-bridge construction completed last year at Fenelon

thing, are more refined and precisely focused than they were years ago.

And Miss Whitlock has worked into every piece an iconography full of complex, indirect allusions to female sexual anatomy, in the tallow-colored, sinewy vertical furls of waxed paper lined up in a row 13 feet long, in the black vertically slit pouches, even in the womb-like, tomb-like houses of silence.

If much about these pieces is the same, one thing has drastically changed: their context. When Miss Whitlock made her commercial debut at Aggregation Gallery 10 years ago, her shiny plastic garbage bags and cheesecloth sacks stuffed with colored cotton wastes — throwaway models of human mortality — were impudent affronts to the pompous high-art ideologies of late modernist painting.

Like the brilliant, influential young New York artist Eva Hesse, who had died a year earlier, Miss Whitlock flaunted her sexual identity and the human condition. She

declared herself on the side of an art which is squarely at life's centre, not primly, prettily hanging around on the sidelines.

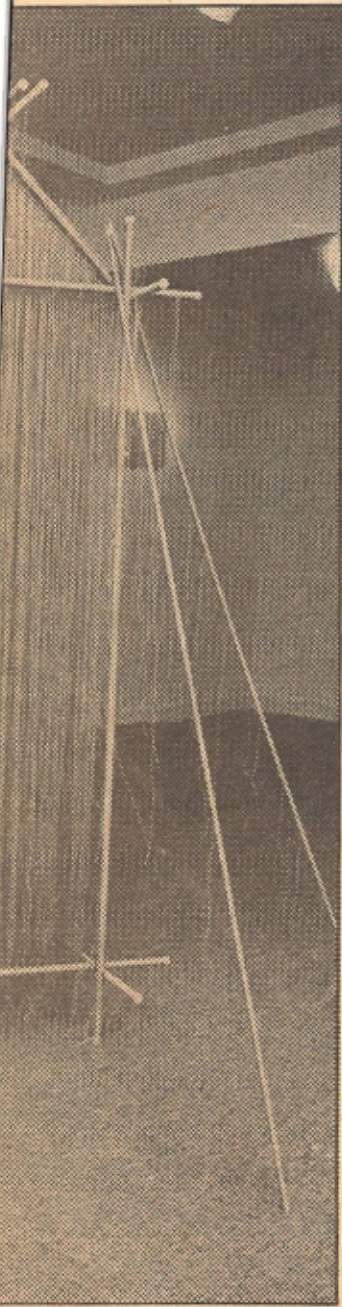
In those days, seen against the background of the tiny Toronto art scene, still catching up with modernism that was already dying in

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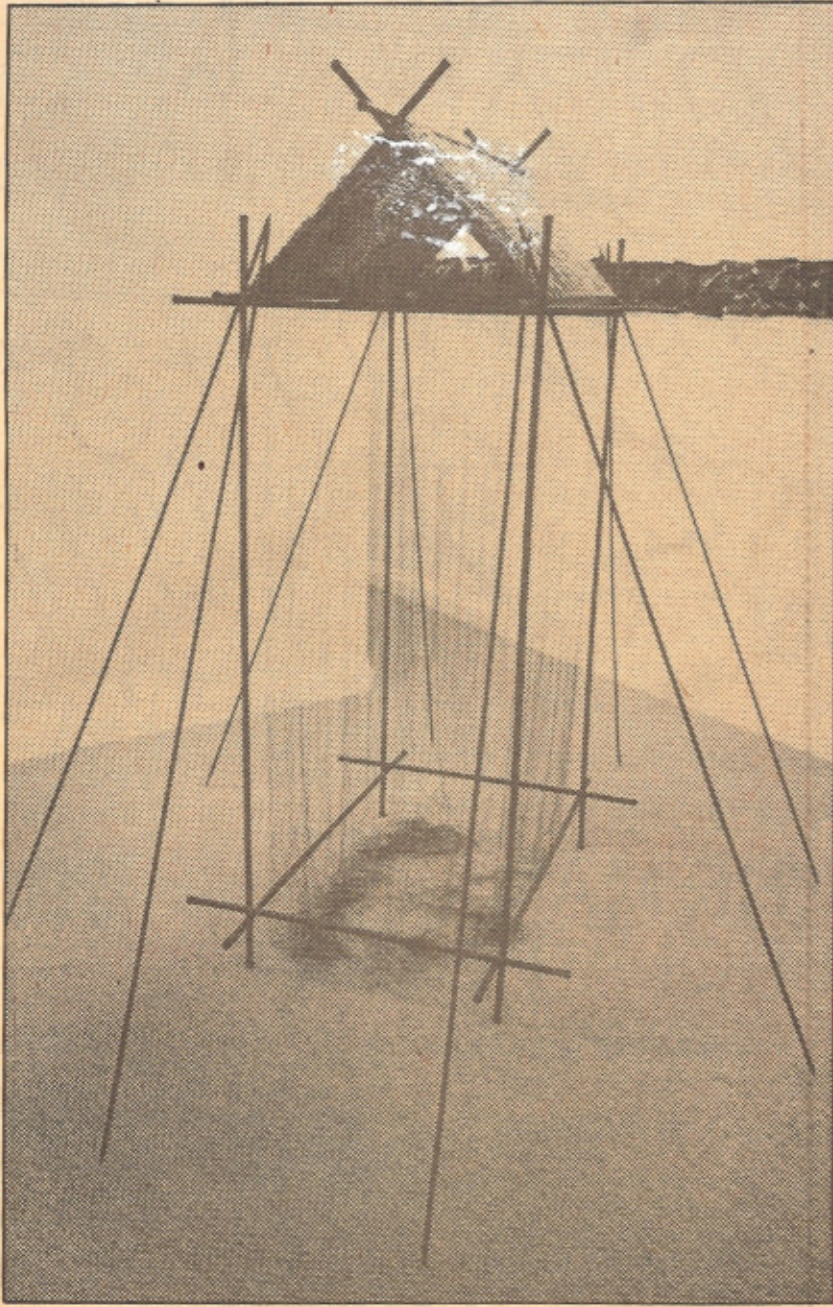
Visions of household as h

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paper, barbed wire



—Globe and Mail, James Lewcun



ssed in two hut-like shrines.

The huts, 6½ feet high, are centres of almost funeral calm.

New York, such art seemed abrasive, daring, eccentric. But in the context of the far more advanced, implicated, various Toronto art world of today, Miss Whitlock's show has all the elegant accuracy of a period exhibition. Her completed works on display here — I

have not seen the outdoor pieces — are careful, extraordinarily handsome, personal answers to questions very few artists are asking.

But if there are symptoms in this show of Miss Whitlock's slackening interest in studio work, the exhibit is also a sign that she remains the

superb technician of the ordinary, the intelligent celebrant of mortality she has been since the beginning. Whether she is going to push deeper into her chosen artistic territory or stay put where she is are the questions raised, and left open, by the current show.

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