

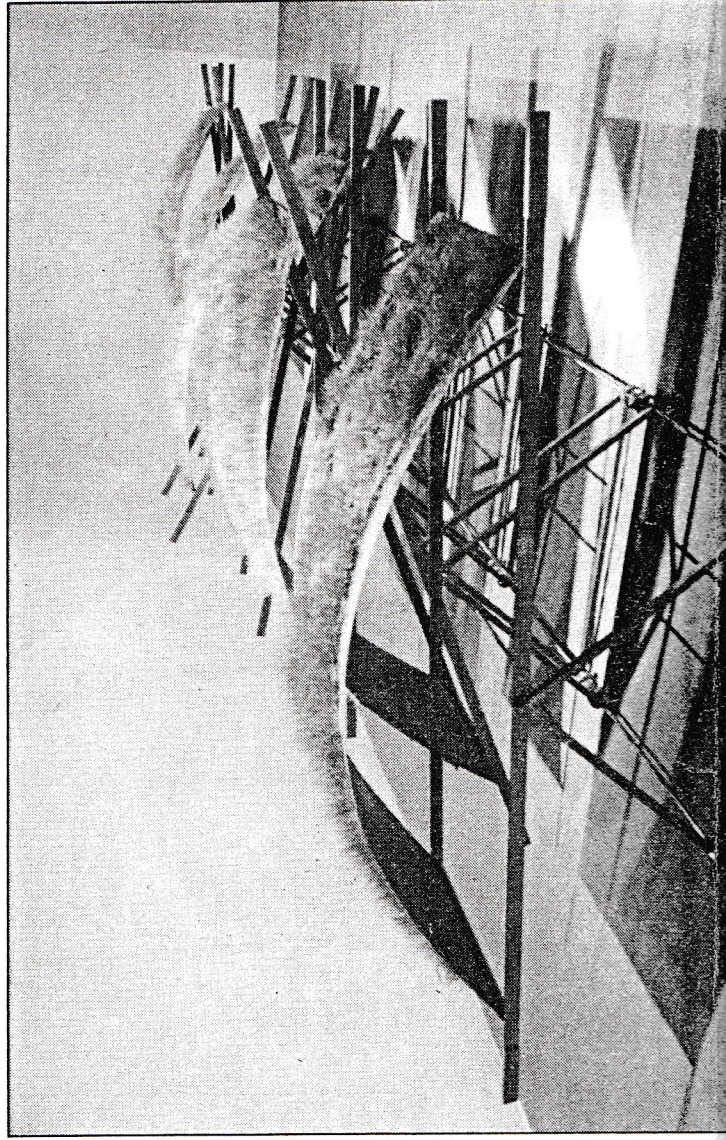
A conversation with Canan Tolon, artist

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

can save the world now, Karuk artist Julian Lang's colorful, symbol-filled installation *Ukmi-atabárvia kun'áarabiti* (1994) seems all unrealized potential: a stage set for an earth-healing ritual, awaiting its performer/shaman to animate the site with chanting, storytelling, drumming and dance.

The Turkish-born artist Canan Tolon also deals with healing and the tension between natural and human-made environments in *Under Pressure* (1994), a beautifully nuanced sculptural installation. But those meanings are densely packed in with others—personal and philosophical—through a poetic use of structure and materials. Seven tautly bowed sheets of metal, equipped with handlebars at both ends like hospital gurneys, are mounted like teeter-totters on exquisitely designed and crafted steel supports and aligned in a row which, seen from above, resemble ridges on

Canan Tolon contracted polio as an infant and was sent from her native Turkey to France for medical care, and subsequently spent her youth shuttling from country to country. Her father, an architect and designer deeply influenced by the Bauhaus, inspired her to study architecture at the polytechnic in London. But, she says, "I had a complete misconception about what an architectural career would be like. My father could be quite creative and design all kinds of things. But architecture today doesn't allow any but the most famous architects to be creative."





tipped separately but not unbalanced. Their surfaces are covered with wax, oil and bandage-like gauze and sown with grass seed which has sprouted green and is already dying in patches. While the rusted, scrofulous veneer alludes to diseased skin, damaged earth and the fragile tenacity of life's natural cycle of birth, decay and death, the sturdy armatures hold this system in precarious yet stable equilibrium.

LaMarr's installation combines vivid collage paintings of abstracted landscapes, full of Native American motifs and symbols, with sculptural assemblages: life-size "crucifixes" cobbled out of roadside castoffs and other earth-polluting remnants of American material culture, as well as a transparent purple plastic tepee replete with dimstore kitsch "Indian" objects. The heavy-handed irony and didactic one-liners of the sculpture do nothing to advance LaMarr's project, but her vibrant paintings are persuasive representations of a profoundly held world view.

If the artists in *Forms of Address* find themselves in strange company, maybe that's all to the good. What links them, or doesn't, perhaps should be left to the viewer to figure out.

Forms of Address through November 13 at the Walter/McBean Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St., San Francisco.

Marcia Tanner is a Bay Area-based freelance cultural writer and a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

works as an architectural renderer, Tolon, who now lives in the Bay Area, has concentrated on painting for many years.

Artweek You had an unusual take on the title of the exhibition, *Forms of Address*, because of your familiarity with several languages.

Canan Tolon The word "address" could mean where you live or how you speak to others. But originally it was a French word, and I knew that it also means "skill." The word "adroit" is related—when you are "adroit," you have "address." The more often you change countries, the more you become "adroit"—skilled in diplomacy, skilled at shuttling between codes of politeness. I took the word "address" in the sense of tact, a way that we all cheat in order to survive.

I loved the title of the show. I thought for sure that everybody would come up with the same work, because to me it seems so obvious. Then, when I saw the other work, I was surprised that there were so many ways to approach it. If I hadn't had a chance to talk with the other artists, I wouldn't have

understood their work at all. It was an example of why dialogue, interchange, "address" across cultural and personal boundaries, is crucial.

AW How does your work relate to the theme of the exhibition?

CT My piece is called *Under Pressure*. The steel is literally under pressure, but it is also a metaphor for the crust of the earth. Most of my work has to do with territorial claims and how arbitrary they are. You really don't know who was there first. The person who comes last cannot claim anything. And we give nature an artificial face with territorial claims. It's impossible to look at a piece of landscape without thinking that it's going to be gone in the future. It is already divided by invisible dotted lines, parceled, owned. So, although the eight pieces of steel seem as though they could fit together into one piece, they are separated from each other.

I wanted to show the arbitrariness and the fragile balance of this situation, and so the sheets of steel are in a literally precarious balance, like a seesaw. I was also playing with the idea of the grass as something rooted, clinging to the sheet metal, which is a highly unnatural place for it to grow. The whole thing is

on wheels. It's transportable, like the territories that we shuffle back and forth as we steal them from each other.

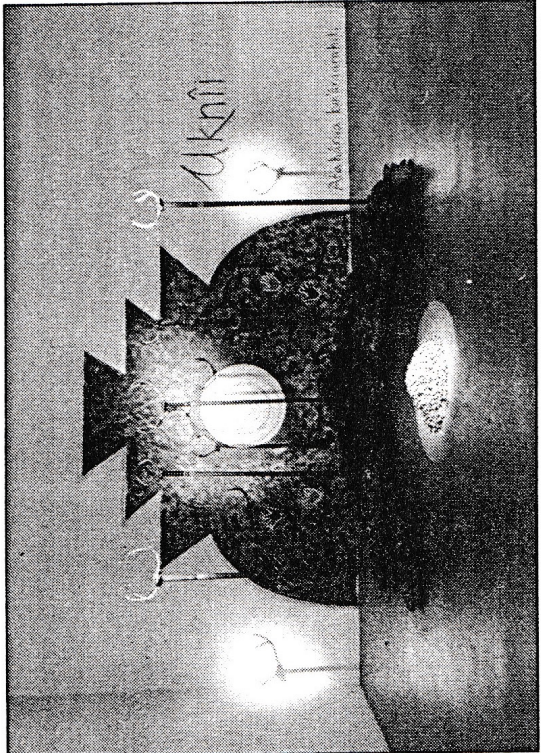
AW Many people base their identity on their geographic location, their country. Are you saying that these human divisions of land are dangerous?

CT Identity, in the sense of origins, is a big word in the art world right now. I don't quite understand why. Seeking origins always leads you to catastrophe. It leads to fanaticism, to the belief that you can purify yourself of the influence of others. For myself, I believe that identity is what you pick up as you live. For example, I am Turkish but grew up in France, Germany and England. I own an accent that is not supposed to be mine. That's really my identity.

AW But people seem to feel empowered by the knowledge of their origins.

CT Knowing where you come from is good. Separating yourself from others is not. The environment bears the signs of so many histories, mine, my neighbor's, yours, and they're all soaking into the crust of the earth, sometimes with such weight that balance is destroyed. I feel this very strongly when I look at maps, especially when I see dotted lines on water. It's so inconceivable and arbitrary. People cannot live on a dotted line. Language bleeds across them and cultures mix. You get an in-between culture, being from nowhere and yet living with a sense of being able to adapt to any culture. That's where "address" comes from. You can shed your old habits and adapt new ones easily. ■

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KALW-FM.



Julian Lang, *Uknif-atahāriva kun'áaraahit*, 1994, wall paintings, mixed media, 120" x 300" x 144" at the San Francisco Art Institute. (Photo: Sven Wiederholt.)