

## At Zimmerli, a Focus on the Human Head

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

**I**N THE WHOLE scheme of things, the exhibition "Expression Abstracted: Heads by Pepi, Rosenborg, Seliger and Sirugo" at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum on the Rutgers campus is not especially weighty. These four are not in the front rank of Abstract Expressionism, after all, and their fascination with the human head as subject matter was subordinate to their more pure abstraction and often started late in their careers.

But on its own terms, internally, the exhibition is quite intriguing. Each of the four is given his own extensive space in which to demonstrate a particular way of treating the human head. The sheer preponderance of heads in a given style is mesmerizing.

The interest in the head, highly recognizable and emotion-laden subject matter, is central to the history of Abstract Expressionism. Jackson Pollock's so-called "Psychoanalytic Drawings" were centered around expressive heads, and Willem de Kooning has rarely been a pure Abstractionist; the figure and face have been primary material for him. "If it has a countenance, I keep it" was his well-known reply to "How do you know when a painting is finished?"

Each artist at the Zimmerli is introduced by a small abstraction in his characteristic style, and although this is not the purpose of the show, one can see stylistic constants that

### Intense visions from four artists.

carry over into the heads. The adjective "intense" can be applied to each of these men, but Sal Sirugo, who was born in Sicily in 1920 and came to the United States in the early 1940's, deliberately makes the head look as if it has been seared into the page. He uses black watercolor that incorporates many shades of gray, and naturally the forms and features bleed and blur over the page.

Mr. Sirugo exploits a variety of moods. Some of his faces are impassive, with features like those on snowmen made with lumps of coal. But on others the bleeding and the distortion of contour is so pronounced that the heads appear to be burning, a characterization the artist likes. Mr. Sirugo's heads are so calibrated in their force that, while the viewer may smile at the most naive ones, the most overwrought recall the emotion of the German artist Käthe Kollwitz or even the Shroud of Turin.

In contrast to the black and white newsprint-like immediacy of Mr. Sirugo, the female heads by Ralph Rosenborg, who died in October, seem demure. What charge they have comes from Rosenborg's frequently

digging in their features with the end of a brush. But the focus is often on secondary qualities as betrayed by titles like "Woman in Green Dress" or "Woman With White Necklace."

Rosenborg seems to have had the leanings of a writer of short stories where terse characterization is wanted. Most of these portraits are marked by strong coloration, but in "Portrait Study: Sensitive Woman" the features are especially pale and seem to float. "Portrait Study: Young Person of Sensitivity" is also a study in evanescence, but this quality is tied to something physical and measurable in "Portrait Study: An Elderly Lady Wise in Her Ways."

If there is a psychological component to the heads of Vincent Pepi, it is filtered through a consuming interest in pure form. Each work starts out with a strong oval underscored by a line defining the torso, and everything else is added on. The add-ons are minimal; in fact, one drawing, in which there is one rudimentary eye and one nostril, is titled "Face," while the others are called "Head."

Mr. Pepi, who was born in Boston in 1936, went to art school in Rome. The classical underpinnings of his art may be the result of what he was exposed to there. His interest in heads began in 1976.

For him, the oval seems to be the pretext for exploring color and the texture of various media. One of the strongest is graphite scribbled over the basic shape oblivious to its outlines. Among Mr. Pepi's 37 drawings here, all but one begin with ovals.

Charles Seliger is the least fixed of

the foursome and works in a way that seems familiar to most people. On various surfaces including cheap cardboard, he seems to doodle; he is reminiscent of a younger, protean California artist, Jonathan Borofsky. While some heads by Mr. Seliger show a generic quality like that often attributed to aliens, many are very particularized, coalescing out of webs of spidery lines. But the viewer is told they were named "Memory Portrait of Whistler" or "Memory Portrait of Dostoyevsky" only after the fact.

The exhibition runs through Feb. 21. The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum is at the corner of George and Hamilton Streets in New Brunswick. Hours are 10 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Tuesday through Friday and noon to 5 P.M. Saturday and Sunday. ■