

From 5 Artists, the Fruits of a Retreat

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

WHILE national parks around the country issue permits for all sorts of strenuous recreational activities, Weir Farm, in Branchville, Connecticut's only national park, gives artists license to do their quiet thing in a bucolic setting. It belonged to the pioneering American Impressionist J. Alden Weir, who bought it in 1882 and invited other artists to work there. Among the notables who accepted were Albert Pinkham Ryder and Child Hassam.

The hospitality continues. Five artists, four from Connecticut and one from Westchester County, worked at Weir Farm last year under Weir Farm Trusts Visiting Artists Program. As has become a custom, their art is then exhibited at the Stamford Art and Nature Center, a partially pastoral venue itself. This year's show is, for the most part, an invigorating affair. It is obvious that the time spent on retreat allowed at least a couple of the five artists to expand their horizons.

The artist who might have taken the most away from the experience in terms of direction is Niki Ketchman from Westport.

The most commanding piece is "Anna's Failed Garden." Mrs. Weir did try unsuccessfully to put in a flower garden at the farm, and nothing grew. Meanwhile, her husband's vegetable garden flourished. Ms. Ketchman obliquely memorializes this event by creating a large towering human form out of black mesh. The form is that of a mummy, or perhaps its sarcophagus, and is decorated with fruit and vegetable refrigerator magnets in patterns recall Egyptian art. This ancient reference is appropriate, for life in Egypt revolved around agriculture. Rather than embody failure, the sculpture might represent fertility.

Alex McFarlane from South Salem, N.Y., seems to have acquired a wider and purer vision related to Hudson River School landscape than he had previously, but since several of his paintings have ocean imagery, they weren't inspired directly by the landlocked farm. His trademark is here in full force: added to the paintings are nonfunctioning objects made of solid graphite that are related to pipes, plumbing and other forms of hardware. The painted canvases are mostly the antithesis of



"Anna's Failed Garden," above, by Nina Ketchman. The story behind the sculpture recounts a flower garden's failure, but the imagery suggests fertility.

hardware; they feature dunes and middens, prehistoric refuse heaps. However, the gloomy "Night Visions" directly addresses the encroachment of industry on a landscape that 19th-century painters had once regarded as a new garden of Eden. Flares like those burning in oil fields are the dominant imagery.

In the mind's eye Janice LaMotta from Hartford comes the closest of the five to working like a 19th-century visitor to Weir Farm. Her "Flora Series," of which there are 10 works represented, is on paper that is made to look like parchment or some other antique surface. A couple of images resemble leaves pressed in a book, and thus become precious souvenirs of the artist's residency.

Nancy Eisenfeld's drawings and paintings have grand, sometimes, even cataclysmic aspirations. She is after the underlying rhythms of nature, and so her work is mostly abstract. But it is activated as titles like "Shift," "Flow," and even "Da



Vinci Whirl!" suggest. Ms. Eisenfeld, from New Haven, shows a thorough understanding of the strong alliance of nature and abstraction when she evokes Monet's placid and pastel "Water Lilies."

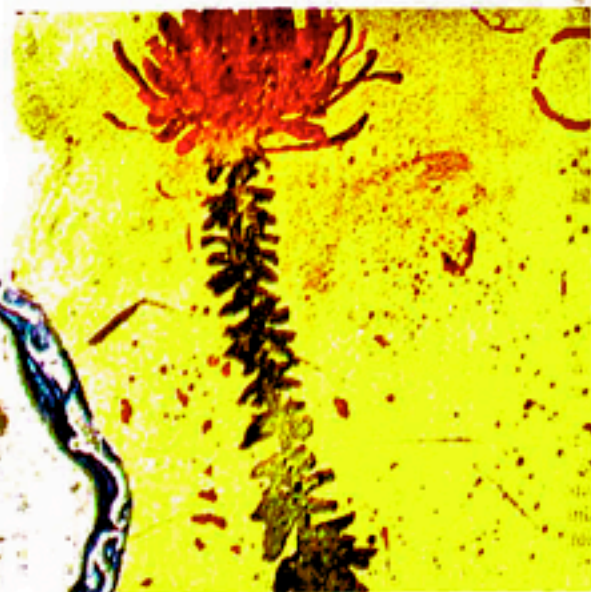
Compared with others in the group, the pieces by Peggy Steinway from Canton seem superficial. She is showing several ceramic platters blithely yet vigorously decorated with motifs drawn from Weir Farm. They have titles like "Tree Near Gated Wall," or "Tree Near Pond," so they become records of actual

details that make the place attractive and conducive to art making.

Seductive aspects of nature would seem to play no part in the drawings by Jim Morris in the Art-X Gallery, the Stamford Art and Nature Center's showcase for contemporary art projects. Mr. Morris, who is a professor of sculpture at Buffalo State University, calls the drawings that are the main feature of his exhibition "Piece of Mind."

The drawings have an off-hand look, but a major, serious theme runs

Inspirations from nature, clockwise from above left: "Tree" by Peggy Steinway; "Flora Series No. 4" by Janice LaMotta; "Algae Swirl" by Nancy Eisenfeld and "Dunes" by Alex McFarlane.



through them. A statement by the gallery director, Ken Marchione, that accompanies the show says that "Mr. Morris's images are maps to chart the relationship between how things are perceived in the world and then transformed into a realization." To embody this notion, Mr. Morris constantly opposes ungainly

mechanical strictures and equally awkward images of bodily organs.

"Weir Farm Visiting Artists," through June 30, at the Stamford Art and Nature Center, 39 Scofieldtown Road. Jim Morris's "Piece of Mind" closes May 30. Information: (203) 322-1646.