

ART REVIEW

Reflections On Tiananmen

By John Davies Delmar

LIES WRITTEN in ink cannot hide a truth written in blood," state the curators of a powerful art exhibition presented by the Asian American Arts Center. The artists "write a truth in blood" to remind us of the horror of the massacres in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

The exhibit, at PS 1 in Long Island City, consists of the responses of some 270 artists — artists from around the world, of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, working in many styles and media. Some artists use video, others splash paint in a violent and expressionistic mode, still others scribble graffiti across their own works as if they were furtive vandals. They use paint, but also rags and bones, sneakers, doorknobs, candles and many other items to display their rage. Established artists such as Nam June Paik, Leon Golub and Barbara Kruger are represented alongside relative unknowns, but each artist's anguish appears authentic and sincere.

The major focus of the exhibit consists of several doors — real life-size doors, hinged together like panels in an ancient Chinese screen. Each door is an individual work of art, but each artist contributes collectively to the entire work. The use of doors is a clever choice — doors represent an opening, a threshold, but also a barrier to be overcome. The doors form a "Great Wall." Each door confronts the viewer — these works do not sit passively against the wall.

Many of the artists use words in conjunction with the images. Pamela Shoemaker's work asks "What do you think of when you think about China?" and is illustrated with a stereotypical, traditionally dressed Chinese woman, cuddling a lap dog. Barbara Kruger quotes Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "You have nothing to fear but fear itself," but undermines the assurance of the quote with an image of a large barbed-wire question mark. Sara Wright's door has a pouch for flyers with quotes from the "I Ching."

One small failing of the show is that too many works are literally written in blood; blood and gore dominate the exhibit. Certainly the artists wish to honor those who were massacred, but Tiananmen Square is also about the birth of an idea, the courage of the demonstrators, and the desire of people to be free. The lasting image of Tiananmen is not of bloody corpses, but of the lone student, unarmed, who risked his life to stand before, and stop, a convoy of tanks. I wish more of the artists had honored the courage and determination of the Chinese people, and viewed June 4 as the beginning of a struggle, not an end.

The exhibit is at 46-01 21st St. in Long Island City, Queens, until June 7, when it is expected to go on tour. PS 1 is open Wednesday through Sunday, from 12 until 6 p.m. Call (718) 784-2084 for information. / ■

