

BETTY PARSONS GALLERY

24 WEST 57 STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y. 10019

MARIA SIMONDS-GOODING

ARTFORUM

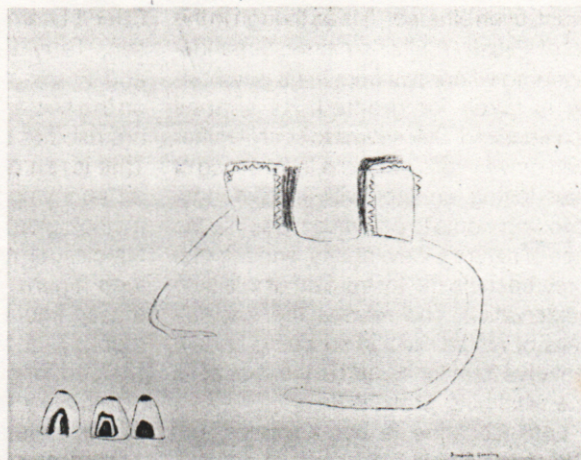
October 1982

ANTONI TAPIES, Marisa del Re; MARIA SIMONDS-GOODING, Betty Parsons Gallery; "Agitated Figures: The New Emotionalism," Hal Bromm Gallery:

MARIA SIMONDS-GOODING

This is another art of "right relationships," as the press release points out. But right relationships are troublesome these days. They seal the work into its own narcissism, give it a false—coy—innocence, and permit us to file it away under the heading "well-made but has nothing to say" (and so finally worthless). What saves Maria Simonds-Gooding's pictures from this fate worse than death—from being merely well-meant, like Tapies'—is their power of reference. Their pictorial delicacy corresponds to the bleakness of the landscape of the Basket Islands off the coast of the Dingle peninsula of Ireland, the area where Simonds-Gooding lives. The spareness of this world is articulated in the spareness of the pictures, as its remoteness is in their emptiness. Simonds-Gooding's incisions wear away the plaster that is her medium the way nature wears away the stone walls that "humanize" the landscape. She finds her humanity through nature; her pictures are analogues approximating an encounter with it.

But the encounter is strangely abstract, even ethereal. It is as though in the act of visually realizing nature, Simonds-Gooding withdraws from it; its physicality is taken for granted, its shapes schematized. She seems to scan it rather than delve into it, yet there is no sense of ever losing contact with it. Simonds-Gooding wants to preserve herself in the face of nature's inevitability, and her pictures become the instrument of this self-preservation; she refuses the forcefulness of nature, and in so doing finds a tentative form for herself in the face of its overwhelming presence.



Maria Simonds-Gooding, *Three Temples*, 1981, plaster with fresco pigment, 48 x 59 1/2".

Late Cézanne is her ancestor, but Cézanne without his sense of nature's material resonance. Simonds-Gooding takes the materiality of nature for granted, and emphasizes the grandeur of its appearance, which is what leads to her eccentric schematizations. Landscape painting is going through a revival in certain quarters, or rather has never really died in Maine and the South. The question is whether it's something in itself or another occasion for "art"—another subject matter to which abstraction can be applied, or that allows for mastery of "real" appearances. What nature is as contemporary content is yet to be discovered. Perhaps nature must be that last source of personal identity when all others fail, that sanctuary whose immediacy makes us forget our own world-weary presence—our own worldliness. But the identity in Simonds-Gooding's pictures is too fragile to tell us the truth about nature today. One is happy to know that it is still a touchstone for "personal" art, and that it can save abstract pictures from themselves, but that is not to examine the validity of our relationship with it.

—DONALD B. KUSPIT