

The New York Times

April 6, 1997, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

UP AND COMING: Michael Ashkin; Trafficking in Toxic Waste and Human Loneliness

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SECTION: Section 2; Page 43; Column 1; Arts and Leisure Desk

IF EDWARD HOPPER HAD LOOKED for inspiration to northern New Jersey and bought his art supplies in model-railroad shops, he might have come up with the miniaturized tableaux of toxic waste and human loneliness that Michael Ashkin creates. Mr. Ashkin, 41, who came late to an art career, had his first one-man New York show last year, and he is now one of the lucky newcomers included in the Whitney Biennial, which runs through June 15.

His piece at the museum is a 25-foot-long floor sculpture called "No. 49," showing an empty desert split by tiny power lines and an arrow-straight pipeline. Two freight trucks leave tracks in the sand as they speed along. The viewer seems high above, as if in an airplane. The mood is stagey and cinematic, although no obvious story line is suggested.

"The pieces are about possibilities," Mr. Ashkin said. "Something has happened or is about to happen, but you don't know what. I don't know what." He stood before the tall windows in his studio in a former factory in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, overlooking a gritty tugboat channel. The view also takes in a bakery and a dormant chemical plant. Mr. Ashkin, who has graying hair, Buddy Holly-style glasses and a thoughtful manner, is fascinated by commercial eyesores. Parking lots, tank farms and tractor-trailers regularly find their way into his pieces, whose slick surfaces he makes by mixing dirt, pigment, epoxy resin and other materials, often while suited up in protective clothing and a respirator.

Many of his pieces are inspired by photographs he takes while driving. "This is one strip of the New Jersey Turnpike I really like, from Exit 14 to Exit 11 near Newark Airport," he said, pointing to snapshots on his wall.

Lisa Phillips, the Whitney curator who assembled the biennial with Louise Neri, said they were impressed with Mr. Ashkin's examination of the "surrealism of the everyday," a theme that is apparent in other current art. "There's a lot of work about American mythology," she said, "and Michael is certainly one who is dealing with it very powerfully."

Mr. Ashkin, who is probably the only artist in the biennial who once analyzed mortgage-backed securities at Salomon Brothers, came to art after an unhappy career on Wall Street and, before that, as a computer programmer. He also taught Hebrew and Arabic at Brooklyn College while earning a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies from Columbia University. But he had always dreamed of painting, and in his early 30's he headed for the Art Institute of Chicago. Five years later, in 1994, he returned to New York, where he began visiting model-train shops in search of the buildings and vehicles he glues to his pieces. An obvious issue for Mr. Ashkin is what sets his work apart from the table-top worlds created by model-railroad buffs. Model

railroaders, he said, are obsessed with faithful reproductions of real landscapes. But he looks at the landscape like a painter, paring away extraneous details and playing up patterns.

Curiously, his interest in models seems suddenly to be shared by other artists, part of what his New York dealer, Bronwyn Keenan, calls "this whole scale thing." The biennial also includes a sprawling cityscape by Chris Burden incorporating thousands of model buildings, cranes and automobiles, a maximalist vision where Mr. Ashkin's is minimalist. Ms. Keenan said the trend was also showing up in painting, with artists depicting bird's-eye views of airports and strip malls.

"These pieces are like the opening lines of novels or the opening sequences of films," Mr. Ashkin said. "You don't know what's going to happen yet, and the possibilities have not yet narrowed down."