

Art-Antiques

LaMantia still tilts with towers of strength



By Alan G. Artner

Art critic

The course of Paul LaMantia's art over the last decade has slowly but surely been one of clarification.

Now, after five years without an exhibition in a local gallery, his paintings have achieved a new, extremely high degree of legibility.

This again opens the gap between LaMantia's paintings and drawings. As indicated by the new pieces at the Sonia Zaks Gallery, 620 N. Michigan Ave., the paintings are in every sense more streamlined.

LaMantia's theme remains the *femme fatale*, repugnantly extended into a mutant culture in some future century. But where these predators once were spread across each surface and pressed close to the picture plane, they now are more fully modeled in the deep space of clearly perceived interiors.

They also are more obviously figures, as opposed to alternating patches of viscera and armor. In fact, the women are figures of armor, menacingly reflecting light

rather than glowing with it.

The surfaces of the paintings are marginally juicier than in the past, though they do not have the richness of LaMantia's drawings, which combine a number of media along with incisions and scorings. The color here is bright, smeary and pastel-like, wonderfully enhanced by the artist's erasures.

It is the drawings, then, that better maintain the feeling of having been poured out without much intellectual mediation. Here, too, are the wilder, more fantastic forms that bear little resemblance to anything human. LaMantia's achievement, strange as it sounds, is in making the horror of these sheets newly seductive and appealing.

No doubt some will find that the rawness of the artist's earlier paintings is lost owing to too much refining. This, I think, is true. But one need not lament the tempering of LaMantia's sinuous, tentacular style. Everything here is tough, hard and readily able to get us queasy.

Like him or not, LaMantia remains a powerful force in Chicago, and it is good to see that while change has brought differences, he is still working at skullcrushing strength. [Through Tuesday.]