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ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; '175th Annual Exhibition'

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National Academy of Design

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Manhattan

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Upholding tradition is the National Academy of Design's worthy mission, and one does not expect to find gestures of avant-gardist transgression among the 160 works included in its 175th Annual Exhibition. What is disappointing is the timidity and smallness of ambition that characterize the selection. Works were picked by 12 jurors from more than 2,000 submissions; the competition is open to nonmembers.

Many pieces show exquisite intimacy, but the only painting that delivers the shock of real life is Paul Matthews's Alice Neel-style full frontal picture of a woman giving birth. This does not have to be the case: consider what artists like Eric Fischl, Jerome Witkin and Od Nerdum (none of whom are in this show) have done with traditional painting.

Nevertheless, this year's event is an improvement over past years. There are fewer works, affording more breathing room (there should be fewer still), and parts of the show are effectively installed. Most successful is a room of all black-and-white works on paper, where a haunting, nocturnal rooftop scene by Ward Davenny stands out.

The largest galleries, however, are overcrowded and too uneven in quality; a gritty abstraction by Louise Fishman (one of a number of juror-invited artists) disappears into the pluralistic clutter.

All that said, the exhibition is studded by lovely things, including a zany mythic procession painted by James McGarrell; a sensuous Cezannesque portrait by Rosemarie Beck; deftly made urban landscapes by Diana Horowitz, Richard Raiselis and Elizabeth O'Reilly; and a luminous yellow, purple-capped Minimalist stele by Anne Truitt. KEN JOHNSON