

'Totem' digs deep into culture, consciousness

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

The idea of the totem as a form arising out of some powerful blood memory has captivated many 20th-

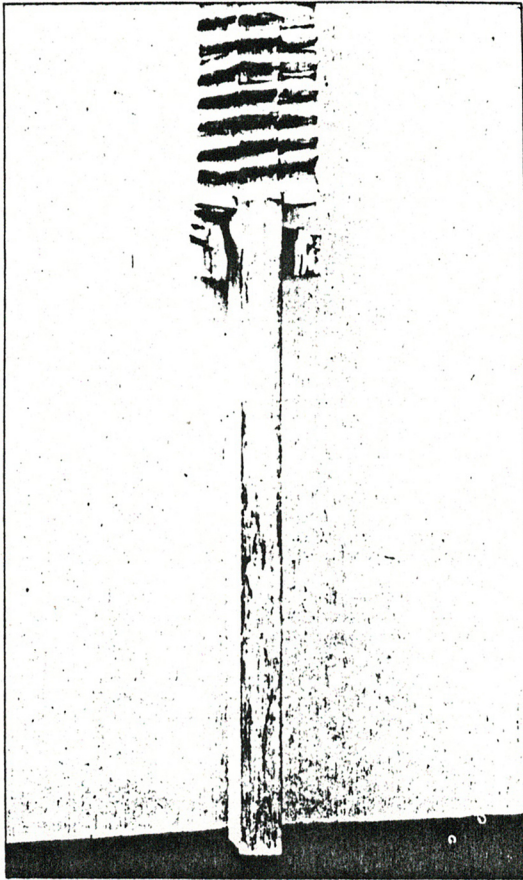
Art Review

century artists, including those in "Totem: Sculpture" by Ellen Driscoll, Christopher Hewat, Robert Rohm, and Ursula von Rydingsvard," now at the Addison Gallery in Andover. The four all have New England connections, but they share more than geographical roots. All of them dig deep into culture and consciousness, and are concerned with time in its longest sense. Their work is simple and striking, with allusions to the figure, architecture and nature.

In purely organizational terms, this exhibition put together by Addison director Jock Reynolds and curator James Sheldon is exemplary in its clarity. It's a compact show, with each artist's work occupying one medium sized gallery. The work is all related visually. Mostly it's made of wood or metal, and has a rough hewn look. It's related spiritually as well. The most successful objects have a boiled-to-the-essence quality that magnetizes attention and suggests eternal truths better stated through form than words. While the shapes themselves have what artists call "presence," they are even more notable for their sense of absence: The people who have made or inhabited the forms are gone, but we feel them still. Even the lighting of the show has a distinct point of view: It's quite dim, in a theatrical/religious way.

Oddly, in every case the free-standing work is more powerful than the work on the wall: Intruding into the viewer's territory seems to inspire more daring than clinging to the wall does. Although von Rydingsvard offers tall, skinny, quasi-architectural forms on the wall, her "Urszulka," five shallow, gouged-out wooden receptacles that rest on old beams in the middle of the room, is far more urgent. The projecting ends of the nearly identical forms make them look like stretchers, and their sagging centers suggest human habitation. The prone position, close to the floor, suggests the beginning and the end of life, beds and coffins. Scratched deep into the surfaces are tracks that also suggest a long-age presence memorialized.

Driscoll's weathered, battered metal forms suggest movement — twisting, rolling or bending. "Map of



DAVID ALLISON PHOTO

An untitled work by Ursula von Rydingsvard.

TOTEM: SCULPTURE BY ELLEN DRISCOLL, CHRISTOPHER HEWAT, ROBERT ROHM AND URSULA VON RYDINGSVARD

At: *The Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover Through December 18*

the Interior," made of wood, tar and copper leaf, is as tall as an average person, and made of rough strips that spiral toward the floor, creating an ethereal cage that also has momentum and physical force. Inside, and plunging straight down, is a funnel that narrows to a near point and acts as a divining rod, utterly sure of its direction. Hewat's work is architectural, more specific and less magi-

cal than either von Rydingsvard's or Driscoll's. In one big floor piece, for instance, an octagonal obelisk rises out of a square base, and its meaning seems to stop when its shape does. Rohm's work is the most directly figurative in the show: Partial shells of figures of Parthenon proportions haunt his gallery. They're made of a steel mesh, clotted with encaustic, and despite their bulky outlines, the material gives them an ethereal, ghostly look. One of the many connections between artists that come up in this show is between Rohm's torso with the sockets of the severed arms stretching forward, and Driscoll's more abstract floor piece with encircling arms: Both pieces suggest a comforting hug.