

Drawing on science for art's sake

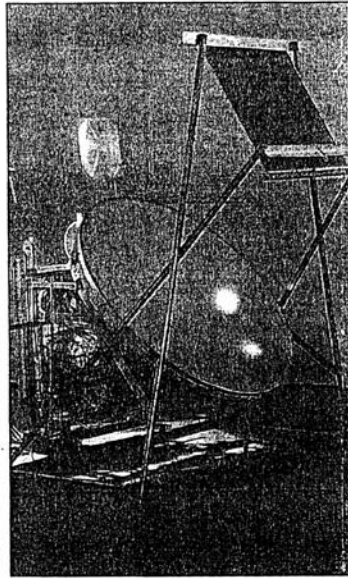
GALLERY GOING GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Juan Geuer's new exhibition at Toronto's Peak Gallery is called *The Truth About Cartesian Clarity* and if there's anybody who knows a thing or two about clarity, Cartesian or otherwise, it's Geuer.

Juan Geuer (pronounced "goy-er") is now 85 years old. He has led a wholly remarkable life. So remarkable, in fact, that it's tempting to try to recount some of it here — at the risk of rather short-changing a discussion of the work in his new show.

This will have to suffice: Geuer was born in the Netherlands in 1917. He spent a good deal of his youth in Germany until, as the clouds of war began to gather, his father succeeded in getting his family expelled by means of what Geuer calls a "particularly vigorous protest against book-burning."

With war inevitable, the Geuers decided to travel as far from Germany as possible, finally settling on Bolivia as their haven. With his parents away, scouting out a place to live in South America, the 21-year-old Geuer, now back in Holland, shouldered the task of raising his six younger siblings by himself. He and his brothers and sisters finally joined their parents a year later, in 1939, living in the Bo-



Geuer's *The Loom Drum*: 'My aim is to engage the viewer. And, to re-enchant the world...'

livian jungle for the next 14 years under cheerful but demanding conditions not unlike those of the Swiss Family Robinson.

Here's where we have to skip a bit. How Geuer eventually ended up in Ottawa in 1954 is an absorbing story. Even more absorbing is the way the essentially self-educated adventurer, now married with children, ended up copping a job at the Dominion Observatory where, for the next 27 years, he be-

came a highly productive scientist and, eventually (though the two disciplines are, for Geuer, intimately interrelated), an artist.

The central work in Geuer's Peak Gallery exhibition is a massive construction called *The Loom Drum*. Beautiful in its resolute stylelessness, it was first shown in 1986 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in a two-man exhibition with Michael Snow. Then, in 1992, Geuer pulled it apart and redesigned it.

The work appears, at first, to be a jumble of screens, viewing devices and hundreds of feet of computer cable. Eventually, if you take your time, its visual cacophonies resolve themselves into meaning: The thing turns out to be a device you can enter, within which, if you sit on what Geuer calls "the art side," you find yourself gazing upon a large flat drum, alive with what seem like random bursts and flashes of light.

Sit in the seat on the opposite side, however, and you find yourself staring through a viewer at a screen that is, in fact, a map showing the overall view of the plate-tectonic structure of North America — millions of years of geological history in a glance.

The flashes of light you saw on the other side are now offered as an electronic re-creation on that map — in a period of 14½ minutes — of the 5,300 earthquakes, with a magnitude of four or more on the Richter scale, which oc-

curred between 1960 and 1989. Just to keep you oriented, there is a small, gauge-like time-wheel directly in front of you, as you sit in the piece, showing you the day, the month and the year of earthquakes exploding before your eyes.

The machine is, after all, as Geuer points out, a model of precision — not a vague, impressionistic, live-in lightshow.

The rest of the Geuer pieces are equally wondrous. His breathtaking Mylar drawings (they are, in fact, like graphic intakes of breath), which have never before been exhibited, are also about mapping. Here, the silvery lines of such drawings as *The Nameless Grid* and *Beyond Parallels* are created, you finally notice, by the artist's having painstakingly scraped away the requisite lengths from their plasticized backgrounds. The drawings are miracles of deftness. Scrape too hard, and you puncture the delicate Mylar membrane. Scrape too lightly, and you lose the line entirely.

"My aim," says Geuer about his work in general, "is to engage the viewer." Fair enough. "And," Geuer adds, saving the best part for last, "to re-enchant the world, not as mystification but as clarity. I want to say how fine the world is, how wonderful it is!"

And Juan Geuer should know. \$1,200-\$80,000. Until Oct. 30, 23 Morrow Ave., Toronto; 416-537-8108.