

An Ingenious Mixed-Media Descent Into 'Ruins'

By Bernard Weiner

It used to be all so simple. Sculptors exhibited in museums and gardens; musicians played in clubs or halls; filmmakers screened their works in movie houses; dancers performed in studios and auditoriums; painters hung their canvases in galleries and studios; actors offered their wares in theaters.

Then, somewhere in the '60s, "multi-media" works became more prominent, and the lines between the disciplines began to blur. Now, increasingly so in the '80s, there is "performance art," and it's sometimes difficult to see the lines at all.

How does one describe, for example, Delta Carnival's current show, "Ruins"? It employs dancers, but it is not a dance concert. It uses film, slides, shadow play, but it's not a light show. It has sculptural elements, but it's not an exhibition. It contains rock and electronic music, but is not a concert. It has a script, and speaking roles, but it's not a drama.

Suzanne and David Manning, who run Delta

Carnival — she out of a dance background, he out of writing and media work — call what they do "synergic theater," a term meant to suggest a seamless blending and mixing of the various art forms.

That says it, in words, but experiencing it is what makes this "synergic" experiment come alive. Parts are absolutely lovely and inventive:

- Imaginative use of back-lighting, with beautiful shadow play, and back-projections, so that characters can assume multiple dimensions, and sometimes even completely disappear, as a result of a lighting change from a different perspective;

- Creative choreography, in the way characters move, transform, create frieze figures (performed with precision by Michael Kenna, Barbara Chrest, Sandy Lynch);

- Compelling use of matted lighting designs, so that characters can appear to be located in keyholes, windows and the like.

There is a plot, of sorts. Each of the four sections of "Ruins" begins with clever taped dialogue of a man describing to a woman his search for evidence to prove that a place called "San Francisco" ever existed in history. (The actors reading the script are terribly stilted.) Then the visuals begin, in part acting out the search, eventually including slides of San Francisco vistas, as though unearthed by cultural anthropologists, in the style of Robert Nathan's clever book "Digging the We'ens."

Ultimately, "Ruins" doesn't make it as a unified aesthetic whole, and parts are too '60s-light show. But

many of the pieces, especially the visual contributions, are often splendidly effective.

What the Mannings are doing is potentially important to the arts, especially to dance and theater, and one looks forward to seeing both their future shows, and how other artists pick up on their techniques.

"Ruins," which played last weekend at Berkeley's Julia Morgan Center, is on view at 8:30 p.m. today through Saturday at Project Artaud's Southern Exposure Gallery, 401 Alabama Street.