

Art in America

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Curtis Mitchell at Andrea Rosen

Curtis Mitchell has his own special recipe for reconstituted dirt: he puts in plenty of crushed glass so that the compost literally glitters when it is pressed into a length of black industrial matting. At Rosen, this floor piece was shown only partially unrolled; it suggested a curious combination of Cleopatra's arriving rolled in a carpet and Linda Benglis's brilliant '60s rubber floor spills. Another low-lying floor sculpture replicates a section of brand-new sidewalk grating filled with a rather chunkier mixture of broken glass and brand-new dirt: the effect here is literally of myriad jewels somehow buried just below street level. If these deadpan proletarian fantasies sound too romantic, the artist also built a perfect square floor tablet which depicts a section of the yellow subway-stripe that alerts waiting passengers on a station platform to stand back from the tracks. This Cartesian bit of '90s urban realism also had its own faint glimmer; evidently there is glass even in Mitchell's recipe for subway pavement.

From this young artist, who has been making a name for himself as a wizard with everyday materials, using everything from coffee splotches to ketchup to make strange Rorschach-like stain paintings, the show at Rosen came as something of a revelation: Mitchell's wild mixes of materials and idioms are starting to assume a neo-Minimalist tendency. The new work seems to reveal the poetry implicit within the urban grid: two colossal square sheets of paper, hung unframed from the wall on binder clips, are punctuated only by the irregular welts caused by the artist's having run tap water over the paper (no mean trick when you consider the dimensions of

the sheets, each 107 inches square). The deep blue and black of the sheets set these aqueous "accidents" into high relief: they seem to imply a kind of vague, process-related narrative. Similarly, a standing screen piece comprising two panels painted in coruscating shades of beige and red seems like the dreariest bit of dilapidated decor until we learn that the panels are coated with six layers of color and lots of paint stripper: in this context the designation *Untitled (Stripper)* takes on the air of a double entendre, for what does one do behind a folding screen if not remove one's clothes?

Several of Mitchell's other pieces seem to depict some kind of boozy mishap. One small floor sculpture is built out of broken beer bottles stacked into smashed six-pack cartons. Two large wall hangings consisting of brand-new Oriental rugs have been doused in kerosene and then torched until they become whitish ghosts. Of course, such abraded castoffs are the meat and potatoes of New York street

culture, but Mitchell's buying his rugs new and then destroying them suggests some bizarre anti-ecological ritual. Other wall hangings are nothing more than white velvet curtains which the artist has treated with at least three colors of wood stain (in drips) and subsequently, in some cases, burned. These reminded me of mid-Victorian paintings of domestic catastrophe, not to mention the alcoholic excesses of the AbEx generation, here embodied in the newest sculptural idiom of truly disastrous drapes.

—Brooks Adams

Curtis Mitchell: *Untitled (Stain)*
1990, drape, stain, burn,
95 by 46 inches; at Andrea Rosen.

