

Mitchell/Feher/ Hayes

Younger artists these days—or is it only younger dealers?—seem to have a penchant for works of accumulation, ones whose boundaries are hard to make out—works that constitute “fuzzy sets,” to abuse a term from contemporary logic and mathematics. It’s become common these days to walk into a show and not be sure without a map of the gallery (for such shows these have become de rigueur accompaniments to the standard list of works) where one piece ends and another begins. It’s something we’d already seen with artists like Cady Noland, Jessica Stockholder, and Matthew McCaslin, and which even more recent emergents such as Michael Joaquin Grey and Karen Kilimnik have taken to greater extremes.

These difficulties with identification posed themselves to me more forcefully than ever with this three-person show, because it was no longer just a question of being able to pick out distinct works by one artist, but also of being able to distinguish among the artists themselves. When works are made primarily out of found or purchased readymade objects and thus have vacated themselves of that “deep signature” which is the trace of the maker’s crafting hand, and have also abandoned the closed and self-contained forms that seemed to guarantee the specificity of even such serial and anonymous objects as those produced by the minimalists—in such cases the identification of authorial style becomes all the more urgent.

Yes, *more* urgent and not less. An art that complicates, dissembles, or effaces the stigmata of the Author only lures us into deeper fascination with this obscure subject of desire. Why else would the most obnoxiously fetishized and cultified artist of our century be none other than the man behind R. Mutt? In any case, that I began looking at this show unable to tell whose work was whose (all the more disconcerting when among the artists was one whose work I’ve followed with interest for several years) but left with the conviction that I had sampled distinct sensibilities, subjects, methods, in a word, three distinct *aesthetics*—this led me to reflect that, in the first place, the journalistic rubric of “scatter art,” which has been given

such work, misrepresents it by assimilating significantly diverse, perhaps even incompatible, ways of working, while at the same time exaggerating differences between the art it claims to encapsulate and larger, older tendencies, both romantic and formalist.

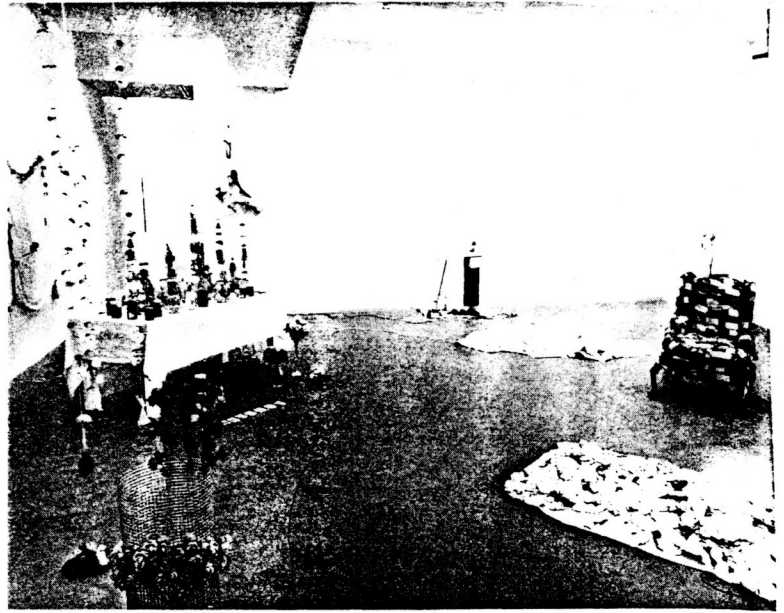
Actually, it never would have occurred to me previously to group Curtis Mitchell among the scatter artists anyway. Here he relates to the idea of scatter through negation; his three pieces are all about failed efforts to fend off dissolution of form. In one, a worn-out upholstered chair has been patched and repatched so often that barely anything of its original surface remains, and the overlapping rectangles of red, green, silver, and black duct tape turn the thing into a kind of comically 3-D Bauhaus abstraction; form-as-defense or as-repression (the process) transmutes into form-as-exuberance (the object). In either case, form is closely allied to madness, or rather to mania.

For Tony Feher, form is a neutral container—which is to say, he’s either no formalist at all or a formalist in the worst sense. If Mitchell’s work exemplifies (but is also about) a manic sense of form, then one might say that Feher’s is its depressive flipside. But if Mitchell’s work appears to take a critical stance toward its own sense of form, we should not be surprised that Feher’s seems to take a very indulgent stance toward the laxity of form it embodies; after all, the former is about an overdeveloped superego, the latter about the suspended one of reverie. Feher’s primary activity really seems to be collecting. Objects are accumulated and gathered in jars that are neatly piled or arranged, but can then

be handled and opened, the objects spread out in lines or circles. Feher is said to have arrangements he likes for each group, but does not insist that these be followed.

Although they don’t refer to specific narratives, the works by Paula Hayes had a very strong sense of story-telling. Of the three artists here, she is closest to the tradition of assemblage from Cornell through West Coast artists of the ’50s and ’60s like Jess and Kienholz, to contemporaries like Jon Kessler (she shares his attraction to chinoiserie)—a tradition of theatricality and eccentricity. Unlike these artists, however, Hayes eschews the “proscenium” of the box or frame, opening the work up to the room itself without trying to draft the actual space as a surrogate box as Kienholz used to. Fragile and provisional as it looks, the work is formally underwritten by a strong sense of surface as movement, as passage from inside to outside, from top to side to bottom, and back again, which is no far from that of the best modernist abstract sculpture—it’s no accident that Hayes partakes of Anthony Caro’s sense of horizontality and “spread.” The essential narrative element in Hayes’s work is the way the eye is led around and through her pieces, the beholder’s sense of discovery: suddenly, inside a drawer, two toy warriors brandish swords against a red light bulb. Hayes is a wonderful find.

To sum up: beneath the appearance of a shared resistance to “form,” three distinct notions of form, two of them (to my mind) productive; a show that raises questions, elicits judgment. (*Andrea Rosen, July 12–August 14*)
Barry Schwabsky



Tony Feher, Paula Hayes, Curtis Mitchell, Installation view, 1991.
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.