

Review/Art; The Group Show as Crystal Ball

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THE group exhibition, that end-of-season ritual, is upon us, and with it comes the opportunity to take the art world's pulse. This year, these shows seem to be everywhere, uptown and down, with something to offer nearly every esthetic palate. Many of them are simply reprises of each gallery's stable of artists, but several exhibitions in SoHo, of which six are reviewed here, concentrate on emerging or little-known artists and offer some signs of things to come.

These shows mix styles and media, high points and low points, and several artists appear in more than one of them. They may lack in overall esthetic impressiveness, not to mention cohesiveness. But they say a lot about a younger generation of artists that has been waiting, somewhat restively, in the wings over the past season.

Fit into a nutshell, the signals they send might sound like this: Ostentation is out. The turn away from drop-dead, picture-perfect objects that reek of costly fabrication processes a la Jeff Koons and Ashley Bickerton continues. On the rise is the emphasis on simple techniques, hand-making, modest scale and inexpensive (preferably recycled, possibly organic) materials. Social concern in one form or another is in, and so is the kind of self-expression that delves unblinkingly into sexual or racial identity or oppression, or into class structure.

The Conceptual impulse in object-making is as strong as ever, evident most directly in drawings and sculptures that incorporate language. Not surprisingly in these post-Mapplethorpe times, some of the words are the three-, four- and five-letter kind. There's also a frequent disregard for the art object that makes the early 90's sometimes feel a bit like the early 70's, and a concomitant rise not only in installation art, but also in performance work among the younger set. Finally, painting and abstract art in general are in such short supply -at least in these shows - that they seem more and more like a daring thing to do.

Above all: The pressure to make art about politics, especially sexual politics, is very real, what with the multi-headed Gorgon of AIDS, the abortion battle, the environment, American involvement in Central America and the debates on obscenity and freedom of speech. But in typical art-world fashion, this pressure is also coalescing into a fad, a bandwagon with many passengers of varying talent.

This weekend's exhibitions fall into two groups. The three most tightly focused ones attest to the emphasis on sexual and racial politics in art today, while three other shows offer broader views in hodgepodge surveys of 40 to 80 small works or drawings.

The relatively focused exhibitions are "Eros/Thanatos; Death and Desire," at the Tom Cugliani Gallery (508 Greenwich Street, through July 17); "Membership Has Its Privileges," at Lang & O'Hara (568 Broadway, at Prince Street, through July 27), and a exhibition at Wessel O'Connor (580 Broadway, near Prince Street, through July 14). The

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last show features the work of Ridgeway Bennett, a pair of young artists who hail originally from Zimbabwe and have worked together for nearly a decade, Marlene McCarty (who also appears in the other two shows) and Dread Scott (whose artwork using the American flag caused a furor at the Art Institute of Chicago last spring).

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Tom Cugliani Gallery

The work in these three shows runs from the personal to the documentary, from the subtle to the obvious. In the 11-artist exhibition at Cugliani, Jack Pierson has simply pinned dozens of snapshots of the same young man to the wall, an off-handed summary of sexual desire, while Hunter Reynolds's photographs trace his transformation from bearded man to heavily made-up Tootsie-like woman. Steven Evans and John Lindell deal, respectively, with male nudity and profanity, but in ways that are almost impossible to see. Deciphering their motifs relegates the viewer to the position of a squinting, narrow-minded voyeur.

Robin Kahn's paintinglike embroidery gives visual form to an obsession shared by both sexes, at least in America: it catalogues variations in the size and shape of women's breasts, while also acknowledging female nudity as one of painting's historical subjects. Ms. McCarty makes a similar acknowledgement; her small canvases reduce the female genitalia to four- and five-letter words, spelled out in blunt, computer-type graphics. At Lang & O'Hara, with a bit more economy and wit, Ms. McCarty exhibits a painting whose central vertical stripe, reminiscent of a Barnett Newman "zip," spells out the word "Testosterone."

Wessel O'Connor

At Wessel O'Connor, in addition to Ms. McCarty's works, there are paintings by Ridgeway Bennett that merge sex and religion using a cross-like geometry, a three-letter word and a surface that includes a great deal of wax and, says the press release, some semen. Dread Scott attempts to mix the documentary with the spatially claustrophobic in an installation work titled "Kinder and Gentler." The piece consists of four listening booths labeled, like restrooms, for whites, blacks, ladies and gentlemen only. Its main impact stems from two audio tapes the artist has spliced, one about violence against blacks, the other about violence against women, both of which begin with the urgent yet cadenced voice of Ntozake Shange performing her own work.

Lang & O'Hara

In "Membership Has Its Privileges," the 10-artist exhibition at Lang & O'Hara, the scene shifts more to the country club set, to the presence rather than the absence of power and to the institutions that power generates. Sometimes this is quite literal: just inside the gallery door, Janet Bigg's grim little paintings invite us to consider the uninviting modern architecture of eight churches and libraries, each labeled with an imitation bronze plaque.

In a work titled "Greek System," Kenneth Goldsmith, who is present in four of these shows, uses some old school fraternity paddles labeled with the Greek words for misogynist, egoist, conformist and so forth to imply a system of exclusion. And Dennis Farber hand-paints an innocent 1950's photograph of a child's birthday party, converting its participants into pre-school members of the Ku Klux Klan.

In the remaining group shows, the number of artists rises dramatically and, with it, the viewpoint broadens. Clearly not every emerging artist is making political art. In fact "Meet," an exhibition at the Althea Viafora Gallery that weighs in with 42 artists, and "Work on Paper" at the Paula Allen Gallery, bear more than a passing resemblance to a survey of old-fashioned drawings. Like most, they show how artists continue to both accept and push against the definition of the medium.

Viafora Gallery

At Viafora (568 Broadway, at Prince Street, through July 21), Lily van der Stokker's "Ja" small, bright-colored marker drawing, condenses graffiti to a pleasing domestic scale.

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Matthew Barney's "Drawing Restraint II (Documents)" turns the act of drawing into a feat of engineering (and wall climbing). Also noteworthy are works by Kirsten Mosher, Christian Marclay, Tishan Hsu, Elliot Green and the ubiquitous Mr. Goldsmith (who, judging from these four "at bats," may be at his best on paper).

Paula Allen Gallery

The Paula Allen show, with 81 artists, throws an even wider net, with a fair amount of humor in the catch. Fred Tomaselli turns out a beautiful rendition of famous constellations, naming each star for a different sleeping pill. With suave cartoonship, Kay Rosen's "Classic Pair" proposes that more than one King Xerxes be called Xeroxes. Kevin Carter smears the ink lines on a sheet of tablet paper to spell "Drunk." And Howard Halle exhibits what may be the first Gorbachev-Bush shopping bag. Further interest - amusing or otherwise - is supplied by Dan Appel, David Hammons, Sean Landers, Kim Jones, Judy Ledgerwood, Zoe Leonard, Hunter Reynolds, Nicolas Rule, Ms. van der Stokker, Pamela Golden and B. Wurtz. The show remains on view at 560 Broadway, at Prince Street, through next Friday.

Andrea Rosen Gallery

The final mega-group show is "Stendhal Syndrome: The Cure," a theme show with a gimmick at the Andrea Rosen Gallery (130 Prince Street, through Aug. 4). Working with Catherine Liu, a writer, and Curtiss Mitchell, one of the artists in the show, Ms. Rosen invited 48 artists to devise a cure for the so-called Stendhal syndrome, whose victims are usually travelers felled by the beauty of works of art. (Fittingly enough, the problem was isolated by a psychiatrist in Florence.) Each artist was given a white metal first-aid kit to work with, and many, although certainly not all, ended up using it. The power of music is several times proposed as an antidote to visual overload, but otherwise the cures offered are as various as the sensibilities of the artists involved. Joan Waltemath lined her kit with fur and play money and titled the result "An Antidote Is Not a Cure," while Christian Marclay simply blew his up, exhibiting the charred remains as a piece of sculpture.

But the extremes of response are perhaps best summed up in those of Jessica Diamond and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Ms. Diamond's wall drawing quotes a passage from Nabokov and then asks in effect, Who needs a cure?, while also directing those who "can't take the heat" to the nearest television set.

Mr. Gonzalez-Torres exhibits a box containing photographs, postcards, documents and newspaper clippings that center on the brutal murder, in Portland, Ore., in November 1988, of an Ethiopian immigrant by a gang of skinheads. Nothing cures esthetic overindulgence like a stiff dose of reality, the artist seems to say, a sentiment that, for better and for worse, many of his generation seem to share.

Photo: "Classic Pair," by Kay Rosen, at the Paula Allen Gallery, is in one of the many shows exhibiting works by a younger generation of artists. (Paula Allen) (pg. C1); Installation view of "Stendhal Syndrome: The Cure," at Andrea Rosen Gallery. ©Peter Muscato/Andrea Rosen Gallery; "Natures Way," by Matthew McCaslin, at Andrea Rosen Gallery. (Andrea Rosen Gallery); "The Party," 1989, a hand-painted photograph by Dennis Farber, at Lang & O'Hara. (Lang & O'Hara) (pg. C23)

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