

Newsstand Images

William Zimmer

Hans-Peter Feldman—Fine Arts Bldg. Gallery, 105 Hudson (through April 26)

This show goes limp on you. You'd just like to boot it out of your consciousness because the innocuous photo images stuck on the wall don't even rise to the threshold of kitsch or camp—but you can't. Their hideous strength is to just disappear into the wall only to plague you later on your way home. They are so low in content or meaning that they become, in a phrase I overheard once and have been itching to use, "mere bumps in the phenomenology of the room."

The images are those that bombard us from newsstands, from T shirts, from greeting card racks in drugstores. An inventory would include things like kitty cats, swans, mountain streams, and curvaceous couples who might be saying to each other things like, "I love you more today than yesterday..." Do I ennoble the show gratuitously by recalling Courbet? After all he legitimized paintings of things like deer in a forest, boring ocean waves, and unreal, nuzzling women.

Further evidence of an erosion of sensibility comes from a pile of books on a table that out-Ruscha Ruscha. Books called 3 Pictures, or 5 Pictures or 45 Pictures devoted to single themes: the pyramids, ambulances, maids making motel beds, forgotten movie stars. I am reminded of *Life* magazine which used to dispense weekly doses of the world in pictures. For a long time my parents had stacks of *Life* mildewing in the basement.

The phrase, "Anything that exists in a gallery context has to be considered as art," used to cover a multitude of sins. This meretricious show sorely tests that proposition as *Hustler* tests the First Amendment. It can be smug because it derives its legitimacy from something bigger and meaner than art—life. The show crystallized for me on the subway when I espied a little girl wearing mismatched knee socks. One bore Fonzie's face, the other Kojak's.

John Baldessari—Julian Pretto, 105 Hudson Street (through May 3)

What a sea change then to encounter Baldessari's bracing photo series. They engage you, they test you, you bat them about like a tether ball, and they rebound with alacrity. The photographs possess Baldessari's patented pristine clarity. They are put in discrete groupings that provoke you to question how each unit in a series relates to the whole.

A pipe, an ashtray, matches, change in coins, keys. This is a grouping that sails smoothly; an ashtray could contain the other four items. A rumpled quilt, wrinkled underwear, an iron...So far so good. But then comes a Bermuda onion. You might look at it linguistically (jacks and then *jockey* shorts—ouch), or formally (a partially opened zipper looks like partially-open scissors) or you might play "scissors, rock and paper." The same items recur in different series. One would like to conclude that at bottom there is only randomness. But like crossword puzzles, get one clue and you're hooked.

Jody Shields—Ellen Sragow Ltd., 105 Hudson Street (through April 30)

For me the early works in this show allude to shopping bags. They are of cardboard and paper. Now come the *schmatas* to put into the bags. Shields has a will to corrupt form but lovingly treats her material. Her handmade, fragile papers are out of sight. Chinatown's finest pale by comparison. They are worked over and and shot through with exotic design. The forms they take are ratty and have the specter of fetishes.

Samaras looms as a large influence but one winces at influences baldly revealed. That is why I was disappointed in a series of polaroid portraits that are close enough to Samaras to be answer songs. Talk about obsession! This gripe aside, Shields is a scrappy artist.

Michael Brewster—Artists Space, 105 Hudson Street (through April 23)

Where are the White House Plumbers when we need them? You enter the denuded gallery only to be hit with little

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clicks emanating from everywhere in the room like aural bb's. None of the gallery staff was present when I was in there, and I was really tempted to overturn wastebaskets and ashtrays to find the source of the little buggers. This is maddening, the noise like the drip-drip of water torture is maddening, but you ain't heard nothing yet.

In the next insulated room is a constant, only slightly modulated, deep thrumming. It is as if semis headed for the docks are rolling by perpetually without a break. If the "clicker drawing" is a thumbnail sketch, this acoustic piece is furry impasto clogging the ears. The magic touch that transmutes noise to art comes when you wend your way back into the first room. You hear the clicks again but after what you've just been through, they are now welcome like crickets on a spring evening.

Susanna Tanger—Hal Bromm, 114 Franklin (closed)

The rough-plastered gallery was a cool catacomb bearing shapes that aspire to universality. The featured shape was like a protractor but with a heightened arch. One of these protractors emanated from the wall in off-white. Opposite was a black protractor on a stretcher with interior division echoing the outer frame. There were a couple of wall drawings that looked mathematically derived, illustrations of the golden section or something, but which assumed the configuration of bats' wings. This furthered the romantic feeling, despite that formal rootage, that one was in an old ruin.