

ART**INSTALLATION FEED**

Burnley's balls: formalist work or painterly play?

William Zimmer

Gary Burnley, Candace Hill-Montgomery, Haim Steinbach, Martin Cohen, Lewis Stein
(Artists Space, 105 Hudson St. through Dec. 22)

Not everything an artist cooks up makes it to the gallery table. Likewise, the percentage of shows that get passed over by a critic is rather high. In this regard the current menu at Artists Space is a good lesson. As independent offerings, most would not get sampled by me. But under this rambling roof, there is much and diverse fare to nibble on, if not to digest. The five offerings now available vary widely (wildly) in quality and temper, reflecting what's being served up all over town.

One from Column A first. Gary Burnley's gaudily-painted balls and flattened spheres that resemble flying saucers would be good memorials to Sonia Delaunay, who died last week. My wish is to set them — especially the more squat ones — spinning, in which case the colors would blend into blurry whiteness. Seeing the pieces on the floor reminds me of a

pinball machine, only here it is the balls, not the playing surface, that is the gaudy component.

My instinct is that Burnley would condescend none of my bubbling; his aims are more sober. Wall drawings indicate that his concerns are the ideated ones of creating a unified composition on a curved surface. His spheres, he points out, aren't sculptures, but paintings. In any case his endeavors are alluring.

The rest of Artists Space has been turned over to "installations," that most porous of artistic categories. With the installation, the aim seems not so much to sculpt or shape a space as to try and fill it with something. Two here are harmless. Candace Hill-Montgomery mixes several wallpaper patterns that set off a melange of kitschy objects. The installation takes off from punk to become warmer, like grandmother's house.

Haim Steinbach has confected a tender room-sized replica of a Harlem site and covered its buildings' windows with reflective Mylar. He shows site photographs of his application of this shiny surface on actual windows. It would seem a mission of his to replace the void with effulgence.

The more insidious installations are those by Martin Cohen and Lewis Stein. Offered as a tacit response to Andy Warhol's Beautiful People portraits at the Whitney, Cohen shows a mural-sized version of that photograph of Vietnamese children fleeing a dousing of napalm. The artless bluntness feels like a kick in the knee rather than a blow to the gut. But the real offense is that Cohen is the well-heeled proprietor of that huge billboard at the corner of Broome and West Broadway. We've all seen his art. (Who could help it?) What does he need Artists Space for? I guess by taking on a "have" like Cohen, Artists Space enforces its democratic ideals.

While Cohen kicks your shins, Stein subjects you to mental torture. You look around the empty room for a sign of art, only to be told that he has built the wall and door that divides his space in two. Your initial urge to kill somebody is muted by the realization that this feeble Dada joke has been enacted so many times before.

Outdoors once again on a nice day, I thought of the fakirs who sit on nails to prove they're sensate, and of my theory that jealousy is a good emotion because by turning your nervous system to water, it proves you're still alive. The same perhaps with installations that jerk you around — you respond, ergo you're here. It was easy to make peace with ballsy Artists Space. I began humming Meatloaf's song, changing the lyric to "One out of five ain't bad."

Sarah Longacre