

NATIVE
NIGHT
OUT

Galleries
BY DAVID HIRSH

Romanic Humanism

• FIERCE PUSSY at the Turn Out Festival, Pyramid Club (closed).
• ROBERT FARBER at Artists Space, 223 West Broadway, to Dec. 1

"They know less about Chronic Fatigue than they know about AIDS. There's less statistical data on what to expect. You have to accept that the line between self and invader is very fuzzy."—Robert Farber

Nine paintings from the past two years are incorporated into Robert Farber's first site-specific installation. *I thought I had time*. For the viewer who enters, it successfully invokes walking through an abstraction of a Gothic town besieged by cycles of plague.

The basic format of joined diverse panels enhances the architectural impression of a plaza opening to the sky. In another way, it's as though a darkly haunted Joseph Cornell collage box had been magnified to the size of a loft studio. Materials in different panels include marble, velvet, faux finishing, cibachrome prints and photographs,

though the room overall is a mixed media painting. The panels also substitute for frescos. Some, in fact, allude to specific late medieval artworks.

On some panels are silkscreened (with oil paint) quotes from medieval chroniclers of the plague counterposed with quotes from gay AIDS patients who have died, in Gothic or modern typefaces. The projection of oneself onto an historical scale is a primary impulse. From within gray tones arise individual voices which effectively depict the gamut of responses to the approach of death.

This cojoining of personal struggle

with disease and historical response invites some comparison to the anonymous collaborative installation at PPOW Gallery three years ago in which personal narratives by people with AIDS were counterposed with a depiction of a health care system which hasn't matured from the dogmatic prejudices of medieval Europe. *I thought I had time*, though, is most directly Romantic, in the sense that Goethe, Sir Walter Scott or Poe looked into the shrouded past to seek a joining of love and death. Counterposing reconciliation with the need for action, isolation with the need to reach out, it is intensely personal and abstracted.

Photographs of the artist being injected with an experimental vaccine are joined to dark monochromatic rectangles. There is a visually seductive intent here rather than a challenge to enemies. Though once seduced, the viewer finds a skeleton with the legend, "What I Am You Shall Become." Christian imagery is used to pose a dichotomy between earth and heaven, ideal and actual—or more specifically between what is lived daily during a plague and what is unknown.

Robert Farber was born in New York in 1948 and graduated from Brandeis University. From 1970 to 81 he was primarily known for performance and he taught theater at SUNY Purchase and NYU. Since 1981, when he started studying at The Art Students League, he has concentrated on painting. In the last two years he has shown in several AIDS-related group exhibits. His *Every Ten Minutes*, a sound installation of a tolling bell, was widely used in galleries and museums to commemorate Day Without Art on December 1, 1991.

The artist recently talked about his new installation in his West Village home:

"I've done more reading about the Middle Ages than I ever thought possible. I'm fascinated with our civilization in the predawn hours of the Renaissance. *The Black Death* by Phillip Ziegler is one of my bibles. Immunology is analogous to many of the belief systems of the Middle Ages. People then saw life in a way that every-

thing was merely a veil behind which were Higher, i.e., spiritual, meanings. Everything had a meaning and nothing was simply what it was. Beyond that, people's understanding of natural phenomena was almost zero.

Today, we have a specific, pin-pointed knowledge of how the immune system operates. At least 50 percent of that knowledge has only been acquired in the last ten years, in the fight against AIDS. I believe that one of the tasks of those of us with AIDS is to learn to live with uncertainty, period. My idea of life in the universe can be summed up with: Sometimes things happen. What solace I've found has been in refining the historical perspective.

My having been infected with something other than AIDS for six years before I seroconverted to positive meant that I didn't know only a daily basis how I was going to feel when I woke up or if I was going to be able to paint. I didn't know if, in the middle of a date, either with friends or romantic, I would have to go home, which often happened. I was forced, in a graphic way, to learn that I just would never know.

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"When painting, I never sketch ahead of time. And when I started to try and recreate, on the first bit of wall at Artists Space, what I had sketched out in my studio—after ten minutes, I threw it out. The only guiding principle was to recreate the room as a painting, to create a heightened state which would prevent a viewer from distancing. What pleased me is that, in a two-week period, I finished it with pure unconscious energy, which tells me it was genuine. In the face of death, the charming theories of Conceptualism are naive musings of people who haven't earned the right to be ironic, because they never tried to be anything else. I finished it just as the doors were opening.

It has all the contradictory parts of myself. For instance, the clouds and sky is from a photograph I took and then had processed in bubble jet, which is a gigantic Xerox—but on it is the disturbing lettering 'N/A.' Which to me means 'not applicable' or 'not available.' As in the Middle Ages, very concretely, considerations of beauty were directly linked to mortality. The idea is to use beauty as a teaching tool and a way into a difficult topic.

I suddenly jumped into a world of grays, whereas my work had always been as saturated with luminosity as I could get it. Wild horses couldn't have gotten me to consider acrylics before now, but a lot of the wall is in acrylic paint. This is the least Romantic work that I've done.

The installation arose from my talking to Carlos (Gutierrez-Solana, Director of Artists Space) about why I had started to use silver mylar in the painting. I thought, what if I put the viewer's face in the painting? Obviously they would see their reflection in the silver mylar. That piece is the only piece which has a quote of my own. People mistakenly believe that the figure drawn next to the mylar is a self-portrait. It was never intended to be, but anything that any artist does, no matter how Minimal, is a self-portrait. In that sense, the viewer is standing next to me in this work.

"Is the last bastion of American mythology, that we are supermen, going to be cracked wide open by the fact that, by the year 2000, everyone will know someone who has died of AIDS? The sense of one's mortality is going to be in our face. A value system may arise from that based on an awareness of what's of lasting value, which would lead to a resurgence, as in the Renaissance, of Humanism."