

RIGHTEOUS INTENTIONS

Los Angeles / Pierre Picot

Three Sheldon wet-dry industrial vacuum cleaners, in designer colors, are contained in crisp, clear Lucite boxes which are stacked one on top of another—largest machine on the bottom, medium model in the middle, smallest size on top (perspective?)—each lit from below by a battery of neon tubes. There is also a large billboard-style poster advertising the latest "roomy" Toyota, a Merit 100 cigarette ad and a portrait of a young boy, the "new Jeff Koons."

What initially looks like a booth at an Italian trade fair is, in actuality, the work of the now older and used Jeff Koons. Appropriating these products of industry and placing them within an art context is Koons's *modus operandi*. I was told that the work is about our consumer society. Well, I certainly hope so, but what else is new?

Five more artists complete the New York contingent exhibiting at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions as part of a Los Angeles-New York exchange. This is not a theme show, nor does it bring to Los Angeles art which may already have been seen in the more up-scale local commercial

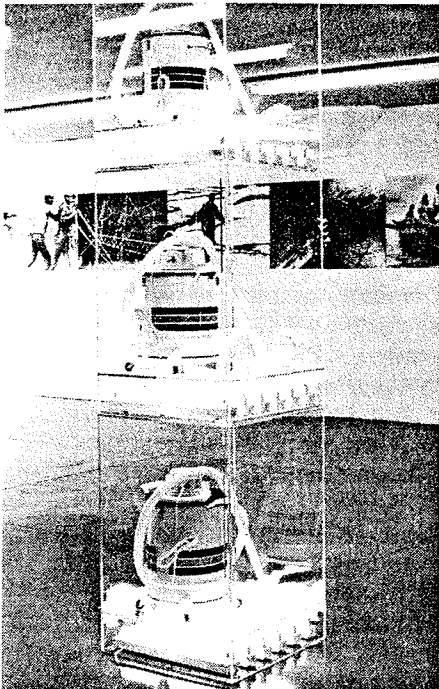
galleries; rather, it presents artists who have not shown outside of their territory and whose styles are not confined to the latest darling *ism*. The concerns range from deadpan postconceptual, what-else-could-it-be-but-art art, to lushly surfaced, dour figure paintings—the kind that everyone who reads art mags these days has learned to love, hate or tolerate. This is an opportunity to see what others are up to, but it isn't New York in a nutshell. It ends up being a show of six artists, unfamiliar to most people here, showing their work to an eager Los Angeles audience.

So, after Koons, what have we got? Christy Rupp makes beautiful, life-size, naturalistic airbrushed trout on cut and scored pieces of cardboard. There are seven tableaux, each made up of two trout, mounted and free-floating on the white wall. As is written on one of the readily available information sheets, "the pieces illustrate some of the changes the trout go through as their habitat acidifies, due to the low pH of acid rain." The message is bleak, but the trout on the wall are just too wholesome, too delicious looking, too sweet. If you are going to talk hunger, you want hollow cheeks,

sunken eyes, swollen bellies, and not this week's pinup boy or girl rhapsodizing about a jazz-exercise program, (though you might if you had a twisted sort of mentality).

Moving to our right, through the windows overlooking the boulevard we see a large, peaceful demonstration passing by. Mounted police officers escort the anti-national-identity-card protesters, the no-U.S.-involvement-in-El-Salvador marchers. In the street below, political action takes place. On the gallery wall, art seeks out politics, but by its reliance on esthetics and ideal viewing conditions, cannot echo the political experience. Picasso's *Guernica* cannot shoot down the dive-bombing Stukas.

With such thoughts in mind, the work of Reese Williams also disappoints in view of the fact that the seven blueprint images laid end to end across the wall all have sociopolitical connotations. Scanning from left to right, we see prisoners being led away like dogs, a fallen power tower (a guerrilla attack?), a fistful hand grabbing a twisted wire, Vietnamese refugees crammed into a boat, a corridor lined with reference drawers as in a library (stifling paranoia) and liberated prisoners of war (circa WWII). By their very nature as documentary photographs, these images are fraught with significance; but together on the gallery wall, what do they represent other than a meaningful look? Apparently these images are part of a book titled *A Pair of Eyes* (forthcoming) and are to be accompanied by symbols, texts and words. As of this exhibit, all that exists in conjunction with the photographs are some graphic symbols painted in red gouache on the first panel. This obscure script only compounds the sense of confusion inherent in a piece which has all the qualities of proper cryptic and indecipherable commentary.



(Foreground) Jeff Koons, "New Sheldon Wet-Dry Triple Decker," 1982, plexiglass, fluorescent light and new vacuum cleaners, 124-1/2' x 28' x 28', at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.

In the work of Rebecca Howland, political issues are also a concern. However, lightheartedness of execution sets her pieces apart from her colleagues'. Pollution, oil wells and power plants, even Ronald Reagan and his jelly beans, are all grist to the mill. In a suitcase, radioactive pimply potatoes lie alongside brains deformed by the pervasive influence of those same jelly beans, in all colors and flavors, and other symbols of power such as oil, diamonds and dollars. All these objects are cast in a plasterlike substance, and all are painted in appropriately pleasant colors. Howland's tone is humorous and caustic—and concerned. These elements make her work memorable. They cajole and tease us into understanding her work and its ramifications by association, not by dry, antiseptic sloganeering.

Enough of social responsibility and art's obligation to deal with the world's problems! The work of Charles Clough and Nachume Miller looms before us. We move from the didactic to the romantic, the more traditional confines (freedom) of painting. Clough paints on top of postcards and art prints, then takes a photograph, blows up the result as a large color print (18"x 24" perhaps), paints on top of that and repeats the process. It could go on indefinitely. The end product is a multilayered "painting" made up of real and photographed strokes, sometimes with a peek at the original surface—an old-master painting initially made up of real strokes of paint but flattened into

a photograph. The pieces look quite abstract, vertically gestural, with an occasional figurelike shape emerging from the maze of crisp and blurred strokes and swirls of paint. These tongue-in-cheek projects result in self-deprecating ironies, examples of the continuous power of paint to amuse and fascinate.

The qualities of paint seem also to fascinate Miller. *Three Studies for Male Skin* is a large, three panel, encaustic-and-oil painting which has a superb skinlike texture to recommend it. Which came first, the title or the technique? A mottled surface is built up with myriad touches of waxy oil paint—reddish and black, bluish and black, yellowish and black (yes, primary colors)—the whole scored and cut in a random, finely hatched crisscross pattern, all blending into three enigmatic male nudes. Two figures, seen from the rear in three-quarter view, stand in bathrooms (?) with very visible toilets (?). They flank a third man who sits, bent and tired looking, in a room resembling a studio where panoramic windows overlook a park with an imposing monument. It's a major effort, full of strengths, veiled meanings, deft paint handling. The mystery of the poses resonates; yet somehow, it all ends up looking so easy. It falls prey to too many cliches of current painting. The doom-and-gloom-school mood, when coupled with the multi-panel route (what the grid was to the seventies, this is to the eighties), leaves me flat after what appears to be a great start.

The whole show seems to be guilty of sliding into a similar trap, due in part to an overzealous desire to succeed, an inbred need to produce "important" and "relevant" work. Now, I don't mean to say that those two factors have no place in the making and creating of art, but such elements have a tendency to mar and obstruct the—dare I utter the word?—*soul* of all creative endeavors.

Oh, to remain innocent and free, while keeping a civilized head. Romantics, dare to struggle, dare to win, don't fall prey to the dictates of those who would want you to be so sssserious . . . I digress . . . I . . . It's her dress.□
