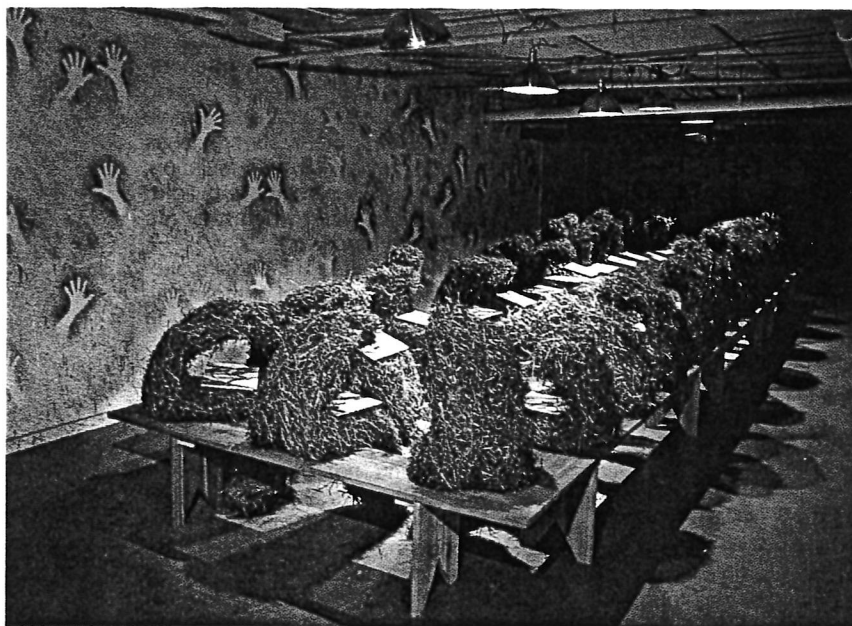


Gail Rothschild at Artists Space

One of the ironies of the recent NEA debacle is the rise of a whole new subgenre of art inspired by and addressed to that art-world nemesis, Jesse Helms. The explosion of sexually explicit, often homoerotic images, satiric political posters and angry social



Gail Rothschild: *A Celebration of Your Re-election, Mr. Helms*, 1990, mixed mediums, 90 by 144 by 420 inches; at Artists Space.

commentary owes, if not its existence, at least its high visibility to Helms's persistent campaign against everything that offends his taste.

Unfortunately, a lot of the Jesse art is pervaded by a self-congratulatory air and a simplistic politics in which the denial of federal funding is equated with book-burning and McCarthyism. While Rothschild's "tribute" to Helms's recent electoral victory shared the anger of much of that work, it was more meditative than shrill and hence more affecting. Titled *A Celebration of Your Re-election, Mr. Helms*, this installation was placed in a narrow corridor in the gallery basement. Exploiting the claustrophobic quality of the space, which is dimly lit, with steam pipes threaded along the low ceiling, Rothschild created an elegiac Last Supper populated by "hay people" huddling mutely on facing benches.

These abstracted figures were personifications of resignation. Created of hay stuffed into wire armatures shaped to suggest armless, generalized human forms, they seemed literally straitjacketed. They bowed their heads, nodding over placards on their laps which contained simple drawings of fragments of a nude female body. The drawings resembled talismans of a half-forgotten past and hinted at a physical and sexual freedom which contrasted sharply with the constricted realm of the bound, sexless hay figures. The sense of imprisonment was enhanced by outlined open hands stenciled on

the walls behind the figures.

The message—the dangers to female autonomy posed by the political agenda supported by Helms—is certainly not new, but it was effectively stated here. As a kind of feminist Last Supper (but one eons away from the upbeat *Dinner Party* created by Judy Chicago), it reminded viewers of the role played by fundamentalist religion in recent efforts to overthrow the values promoted by the women's movement. At the same time, the tableau resembled a reeducation class, in which errant citizens are taught to recant their rebellious ways. There also seemed to be a comment embodied in the interchangeability of the figures, about the cost to the individual of social and political conformity.

Keeping the decibel level down, Rothschild created a memorable image of the horrors of life in the world according to Jesse. The message was not complex, but it was compelling

—Eleanor Heartney