

**Plea-
sure**

**Nothing needs less justification
than pleasure.”
-Bertolt Brecht**

To entertain and give pleasure was, for Brecht, the ultimate ambition of theater. In his remarkable and comprehensive formulation, a conception of “stronger (complex) pleasures,” which are “more intricate, richer in communication, and more productive of results,”¹ reinforces the function of entertainment to inquire, inform and transform. Roland Barthes likewise conceived of the experience of reading in terms of gratification. He described an enjoyment that goes beyond pleasure as the reader moves from “readable texts” to “writerly texts,” “Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.”² Engaging the writerly, while considerably more difficult, is profoundly more rewarding and engenders a delirious ecstasy that Barthes terms “jouissance.” In both these instances the issue is the enjoyment of the audience, and the vehicle is a difficult process requiring the active participation of the viewer in the creation of meaning.

This self-reflexiveness in theater and literary criticism has its parallel in contemporary visual arts, yet there is not necessarily a comparable analogue for the impulse toward entertainment and pleasure. Rather, it has become a cliché of modern art for beauty to function as an afterthought, realized only after the avant-garde gesture has been assimilated. In recent Post-Modernist practice, issues of beauty and visual pleasure have been dissected and virtually discarded in their critique.

This exhibition examines that procedure and surveys the possibilities for the exploration of visual pleasure in the aftermath of its deconstruction. The selected artists investigate a variety of conceptions of beauty in a manner that alternately extols and critiques. Maintaining an awareness of mass culture and its relation to "high art," much of the work utilizes the actual and/or symbolic objects of everyday life in a context that spans a complex network of readings from the concrete to the abstract. Functioning within a formal vocabulary, while acknowledging and engaging the radical discourses of Post-Modernism, these artists position themselves in relation to media-obsessed Deconstructivists as Minimalism is positioned in relation to Pop Art. It is an inquiry that is informed, but not consumed, by its culture, and ultimately focuses on the issues of perception, cognition and creation of visual meaning.

The work in this exhibition encompasses a spectrum of different practices, with Sean Landers's hyper mediated sculpture

at one end and Sanford Wurmfeld's phenomenological paintings at the other. In Landers's resin-encased plaster busts, beauty is distanced - literally - to the point of inaccessibility. The dramatic obscuring of the classical sculpture within the sculpture throws into question traditional ideas of beauty and the system of hierarchies that creates and controls them. John Torreano utilizes the image of precious gems to describe the social process of assigning value and its corollary, collecting (jewelry, fine art, etc.). He seemingly embraces the objects themselves while simultaneously focusing attention on the arbitrary absurdity of this process via the pervasive irony saturating the execution and presentation of the work. Barbara Dahl reiterates this ambivalent cultural critique. Her gold and silver bars are debased by a rough, painterly handling while the use of a formalist, serial composition serves to minimize their "value."

Sexual pleasure and sensuality are explored in the work of Marilyn Minter and Bonnie Rychlak. Minter's work is literal, graphic and gleefully direct. The contradiction inherent in her subject matter, pornography, erotic yet alienating, is reflected in the use of mechanical reproduction and layered images. Rychlak's work functions metaphorically, suggesting flesh and body parts (genitals, breasts, etc.). Her box pieces allude to Impressionist painting in their hazy, out-of-focus imagery, but rather than illuminate nature, they obscure it. Fabric is used to refer to pattern and decoration, as well as the application of materials traditionally

associated with the "feminine" domain of handicraft.

Mari Rantanen's work spans the history of decorative pattern making. The cataloging and raucous colliding of these motifs, combined with a loose, almost cartoon rendering, emphatically denies the passive banality of decoration. Richard Phillips employs subtle irony to deflate domesticity. His beautifully crafted pieces suggest plush furniture and comfort, but are actually models for tombstones. This allusion to death is rendered bittersweet (the death wish), and also refers to the death urge of much contemporary aesthetic discourse, i.e. the death of painting, the death of art, the death of the death of art, etc. This terrain is also explored by Elizabeth Vahlsing in her number/game paintings. They deal with the innocent pleasures of childhood that are about to be ended by the encroachment of language, while referring humorously to Duchamp's chess game.³

The lush painterly fields in Andy Moses' work initially suggest Abstract Expressionism but also evoke vast astronomical expanses and minute chemical/ particle reactions. Reinforced by bracketing texts from "Science Times", they draw attention to the epistemological link between aesthetic and scientific inquiry. The directive "it must be beautiful" has served as a guide for scientific research, while articulating a definition of beauty based on simplicity and elegance.⁴ Investigative rigor and symmetrical composition structure Sanford Wurmfeld's paintings. Based on

the experience of the interaction of color, these paintings are instantly accessible and revealing. Their complete reading, however, requires the time and the active participation of the viewer in the decoding and recreating of color phenomena.

The various artistic practices represented in this exhibition utilize an approach that is inherently dialectical and interactive. Pleasure is both a function of subject matter and of the engagement of the work. Rather than devising a technique or deploying a strategy, this exaltation of pleasure is intended as an experience of liberation, "On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object. The text supersedes grammatical attitudes: it is the indifferentiated eye which an excessive author (Angelus Silesius) describes: 'The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which He sees me.'"⁵

Steven Salzman

Footnotes

1. Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre*, translated by John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, p. 181.
2. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller. New York: Noonday, 1989 p.14.
3. Yves-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986, pp.43-44.
4. Lawrence Leshan and Henry Morganau, *Einstein's Space and Van Gogh's Sky*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., pp.81, 192-195.
5. Barthes, op cit., p.16.

Barbara Dahl

Untitled 1988.
acrylic, cat litter, graphite,
aluminum leaf on wood
39 1/4 x 18 x 2"
Courtesy of the artist

Untitled 1989.
acrylic, cat litter, silver leaf
on wood
52 3/4 x 52 3/4 x 2 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist

Sean Landers

French Lady 1989.
polyester resin, plaster and wood
55 x 18" diameter
Courtesy Postmasters Gallery,
New York

Laocoön III 1990.
polyester resin, plaster and wood
56 1/2 x 16" diameter
Courtesy Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York

Marilyn Minter

Oral Make-Up #1 1991.
mylar, rivets on metal sign
33 1/4 x 30 1/2"
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery,
New York

Oral Make-Up #4 1991.
mylar, rivets on metal sign
30 1/2 x 33"
Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery,
New York

Andy Moses

Sea Hitchhiker's Long Journey 1990.
acrylic, alkyd, silkscreen on
canvas
60 x 78"
Courtesy of the artist

*Alchemist's Notes to Modern
Chemistry* 1990.
acrylic, alkyd, silkscreen on
canvas
67 1/2 x 90"
Courtesy of the artist

Richard Phillips

Morning Goth 1989.
leather, latex, and lace
54 x 36 x 4 1/4"
Courtesy of the Rubell Family
Collection

Untitled 1990.
leather, latex, and lace
53 x 59 1/2 x 4 1/2"
Courtesy of Sam and Maia
Hunter

Mari Rantanen

Sweet Keeper 1990.
acrylic and pigments on canvas
24 x 32"
Courtesy of the artist

*Relative Positions of the
Essential* 1990.
acrylic and pigments on canvas
72 x 104"
Courtesy of the artist

Bonnie Rychlak

Beverly 1990.
encaustic over tapestry, fabric,
cast wax
36" diameter, 5" protrusion
Courtesy of the artist

C.K.C. III 1990.
encaustic over burlap, glass,
mirrors, tapestry and fabric
28 x 23 1/4 x 23 1/4"
Courtesy of the artist

John Torrealto

Gold Metal 1990.
gold leafed cast aluminum
gems on plywood with
enamel and gold leaf
72 x 72"
Courtesy Nina Freudenheim
Gallery, Buffalo

Tumble 1991.
plywood, enamel and gems
8 x 5 x 4"
Courtesy Nina Freudenheim
Gallery, Buffalo

Elizabeth Vahlsing

One-Two-Three 1989.
oil on canvas
58 x 49 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist

Tic-Tac-Toe 1991.
oil on canvas
53 1/2 x 68"
Courtesy of the artist

Sanford Wurmfeld

II-9 (Semi-Sat +N) 1988.
acrylic on canvas
57 x 57"
Courtesy of the artist

II-9 (Yellow-White) 1988.
acrylic on canvas
57 x 57"
Courtesy of the artist

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curated by
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