

# Is Installation exhibit the end-of-an-age art?

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Art Critic

Are we close enough to the end of the century that we can start to identify a *fin de siecle* sensibility in art? Are we beginning to see the signs of spiritual exhaustion and apocalyptic thinking that also characterized the last decades of the 19th century?

The answer is yes, in more ways than one. In figurative picture-making, the pale, world-weary dandy, so prevalent in turn-of-the-century Viennese painting, reappears in the art of Francesco Clemente. In landscape paintings, there are misty, brooding scenes by artists such as Gustavo Ojeda and Joan Nelson, which raise the specter of late 19th century symbolist art.

Even in recent Conceptually oriented work, which has no direct precedent in the art of a century ago, there is the sense of an ending. In the late '60s and into the '70s, Conceptual artists used photographs and text to

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make art about art about art.

But later work in this vein has attempted to be socially critical or confrontational. Barbara Kruger, Bruce Nauman, Jonathan Borofsky and lesser knowns have taken a dark view of our moment. Considered collectively, their art argues that we are witnessing the reduction of the individual to a unit of measure in marketing studies or polls; the increasing disintegration of a moral bond between society and individual; and perhaps the beginning of the end of civilization itself.

In an exhibition with the (unnecessarily) lengthy title "Corporate Crime/Malicious Mischief, Power and Mediation: A Fin de Siecle Tautology," on view at Installation (gallery), curator Armando Rascon has selected conceptually oriented art

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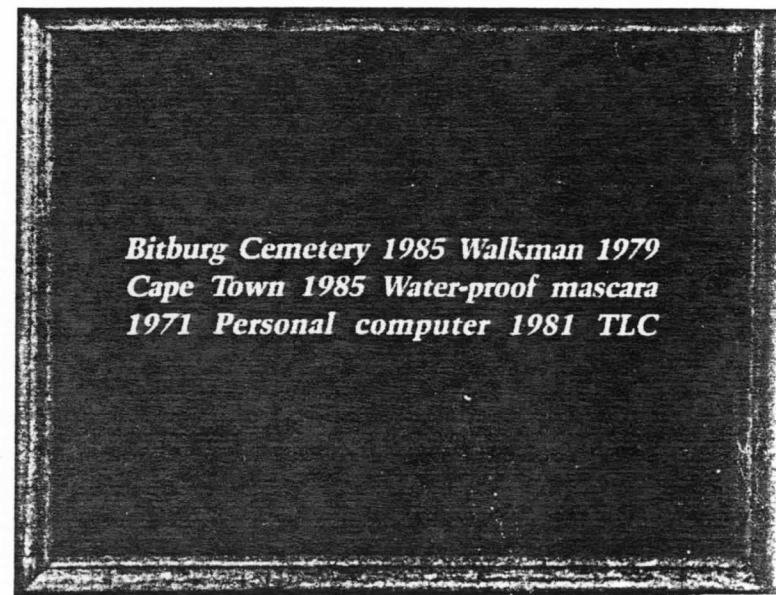
preoccupied with these and related themes. And the subtitle of his show hints that it is an end-of-an-age art Rascon has selected, though he never lets us know why.

Twenty artists — from New York, the Bay Area and here — give us wall works which employ text and/or photographs, a smattering of paintings and a couple of videotapes. (If we want to get technical, three of the 20 — Peter Frank, Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo — are critics rather than artists, who provide written statements relevant to the theme.)

Museums, in the '80s, are public relations tools of the corporations, according to the art of Peter Nagy. In his laminated photocopy on panel, "Intellectual History" (1984), Nagy has redone the typical handout map of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York — arbitrarily superimposing the names of corporations throughout the same diagram.

Politicians and movie stars are the butts of Lutz Bacher's "Jokes" (1986), a series of photographs she has purloined from journalistic sources, enlarged greatly and embellished with crass captions. Henry Kissinger, conferring with former President Gerald Ford, is made to say, "Seen one president, seen them all." In another appropriated picture, he comments, "The illegal we do immediately; the unconstitutional takes a little longer."

America's earliest president fares no better in this show. Richard Irwin gives us America's most reproduced icon, George Washington, as a savage effigy in sunglasses. His face, painted black with silver highlights, hangs



'1987' by Felix Gonzales-Torrez (1987).

above a cross of barb wire. A little scroll-like placard, hanging just below the cross reads "Lucifer Satan Devil." It is as if Irwin wants to exorcise his American past, or, at the very least, subvert the heroic representation of Washington in early American art.

Nagy, Bacher and Irwin are cynical, to be sure. So is much of the rest of the work in this exhibition. Sexual relations are reduced to pornography in Richard Armijo's three panel "Pay to See Love" (1987). Each sexual act is depicted in a sepia tone photograph, matted against a large sheet of black paper. In Michael Corris' prints, the corporate executive, whose face is borrowed from the "Have a Nice Day" sticker, stands atop a platform supported by pillars whose interiors are filled with hun-

dreds of repetitions of the same word in small type — "blah."

Is this cynicism warranted? Probably so, in a time when the number of homeless increase while a select few pay millions for a single painting; when budget deficits imperil our economy but the government struggles to simply make a dent in the staggering debt.

The art in this exhibition raises an important question that it does not sufficiently answer: How can we effectively confront our troubled moment in art? These works don't answer it because their criticisms, in the main, are too easy, too didactic, too glib. What Nagy tells us about museums, Hans Haacke has already done better. Bacher's "jokes" at the expense of politicians and pop celebrities aren't even as good as political



One of Lutz Bacher's series of 'Jokes' (1986).

satire of the "Saturday Night Live" variety. Irwin's Washington is perversely funny, but has no more staying power than a one liner.

Felix Gonzalez's photostats, more ambiguous in tone, prove more intriguing. In an example from his "1987" series, with white type on a black surface, is divided into three lines: "Bitburg Cemetery 1985 Walkman 1979/ Cape Town 1985 Water-proof mascara/1971 Personal computer 1981 TLC."

What are we to make of this little catalogue of dates, places and things? Are we to think that the artist finds all of these things to be of equal importance? Surely not; there is obvious irony in placing Cape Town next to waterproof mascara on his timeline. Or are we to think that our society equates them, if only in-

advertently? Perhaps — and that is an unsettling implication of Gonzalez's list. But there is enough ambiguity here to suggest there are other

interpretations and the relationship between different aspects of society — commercial and political — is complex.

Despite its drawbacks, this exhibition is provocative, because it forces us to ask questions about what we want in the way of social criticism from art. With the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and other assistance, Installation commissioned Rascon to curate the show and edit an accompanying catalogue.

It would be hard to imagine any other local showcases — aside from perhaps the university galleries — mounting a theme exhibition such as this. And at a time when Installation has been experiencing financial woes, we can renew our appreciation of its crucial role in the local art scene by visiting "Corporate Crime/Malicious Mischief" and pondering the issues it raises.

**The exhibition continues through Dec. 19. Installation, 930 E St., is open Wednesday through Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.**