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New York Scene

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Steven Campbell, *Portrait of Robert Urquhart taking the R.U. Neurotic Test*, 1988. Oil on canvas; 177.8 x 320 in.

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Steven Campbell at Marlborough Gallery, September 8 to October 1, 1988 — Like more than a few inhabitants of the British Isles, the 35 year old Scottish painter Steven Campbell cultivates his eccentricities. Photographs of the artist show a scruffy-dressed, slightly hulking figure with shoulder length, unruly blonde hair. After five years in New York — one occasionally sighted Campbell on the streets of Soho looking as if he had just stepped out of one of his paintings — the artist has recently returned to his hometown of Glasgow. Apparently the locale suits him, for his September show at Marlborough Gallery presented 29 substantial works, all but three of which dated from this year. The show felt closer to a museum exhibition than a gallery show in terms of sheer square footage. It is a tribute to Campbell's vigor that none of his paintings seemed dashed off. However one may feel about his work (and I will get to that subject in a moment), one cannot but admire a rather 19th century capacity for vast productivity. He puts one in mind not so much of painters as of those prodigious novelists like Balzac, Dickens or Trollope from whose sturdy pens characters and situations flowed without cease.

That writers come to mind when looking at Campbell's work is not accidental for he belongs to that most cursed of tribes: literary painters. From the Pre-Raphaelites to Stanley Spencer, Francis Bacon and David Hockney, British painters have quite often been more interested in illustrating their pre-conceived

ideas, in bringing anecdotes to life, than in discovering the as yet unknown. Campbell, like Bacon, has sought in interviews to draw attention to the accidental elements in his process, as if to pre-empt the charge of his being a mere illustrator. A recurrent theme in his recent work — a critique of abstraction's current fashionability — also points to his touchiness on the subject. In a painting titled *Murder Through An Abstraction* one figure is shooting at another through a torn Mondrian-type canvas. A companion painting carries the title *If the Premise is Murder Through Abstraction Ten Abstain From Action*. In other paintings Campbell takes potshots at Le Corbusier for his geometric simplification.

Campbell seems to thrive on a sense of feeling embattled. His knowledge that his work is out of step with most of the world around him serves to imbue his ambiguous allegories with increasing complexity, forces him to vent his obscure rage with greater conviction. Witness his *Portrait of Robert Urquhart taking the R.U. Neurotic Test*, a study in visual paranoia. Perhaps what saves Campbell from being merely literary is precisely this obsessive concern with the conflicting visual discourses in the world. He is embattled, but not isolated. Or, to put it another way, a British painter who has read French philosophy. (One painting, the largest in the show, was titled *Bonjour, Monsieur Foucault*.) Indeed, it would take a mind like Foucault's to elucidate the work of this Celtic Magritte, which leaves the present writer conveniently excused.



Mike Kelley, *The Wages Of Sin/More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, 1987. Wax candles on base/stuffed animals and afghans sewn on canvas; 26 x 24 x 24 in./96 x 127 x 6 in

Mike Kelley at Metro Pictures, September 10 to October 1, 1988 — The current model of the rebellious artist involves the notion of attacking the system from the inside, producing a work of art which questions certain entrenched beliefs about originality, sincerity and the separation of art and commerce while, at the same time, reaping the benefits the system makes available. The late Andy Warhol is of course the epitome of this strategy, though his followers have replaced his omnivorous amorality with a variety of clearly defined philosophical and political agenda. In order to move effortlessly through the art system, while retaining their not-so-hidden critique of that system, it has been necessary for their art and their personae to be polite and well-behaved. They want to overthrow the monarchy without disturbing the routine of the palace; they want the title of outsiders; at the same time they present their work for eventual inclusion in the pantheon of Moma. History may have a cruel joke in store for them since the fine shades of irony on which their work's difference is predicated may fade over time, so that there will be little to choose from between a Peter Halley and an Ellsworth Kelly in 50 years, except in terms of quality.

The 35 year old artist Mike Kelley (not to be confused with and no relation to the aforementioned abstract painter) is another kettle of fish altogether. His work's chief qualities are ugliness, insult, and perversion. His vocabulary of images and materials draws on the most banal and creepy aspects of contemporary society, but not, as with Polke or Salle, to expand the boundaries of the modernist aesthetic. A few examples : a 1985 installation that satirized the Rothko Chapel in Houston with some painted bedsheets labeled "Rothko's Blood stain (Artist's Conception)"; an exhibit which included a painting done in prison by a man arrested in 1978 for the murder

of 33 teenage boys which Kelley surrounded with quotations from Blake, Degas, Breton and others equating art and crime; a series of paintings called "Incorrect Sexual Models" in which various sexual conditions are represented by drawings of kidneys, intestines, brains and eyes arranged in cartouche forms; a huge banner of sloppily glued felt which reads "Pants shitter & proud. P.S. Jerk-off too (and I wear glasses)"; a large hanging piece titled *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* composed of dozens of the most insipid stuffed animals and dolls, flanked by a pedestal of equally insipid candles of the sort sold in cheap gift shops.

A resident of Los Angeles, Kelley creates objects which would be ludicrous to describe with the usual critical vocabulary. Yet because he presents the absolutely worst aspects of American life with such veracity and figuratively vomits at the threshold of high culture, he keeps alive the elsewhere withered model of the artist as rebel, thus forcing one to respond with more than a simple "yuk !".

Nonetheless, it remains difficult to get anything like "an ecstatic experience" from Kelley's recent show. The stuffed animals-wax candle piece was just about the ugliest thing I have seen in a gallery since the heyday of the East Village and the fact that the felt banners were inspired by similar works promoted by the Vatican during its attempt at relevancy in the 1960's left the mind reeling at the sophistication of the hottest's eye for banality. The mottos on two of the banners pretty much say it all : "Let's talk about disobeying" and "I am useless to the culture but God loves me."

In fact, Kelley may be alot less useless to the culture than many others, but that does not mean one has to love him for it. Disobedience is its own reward.



Günther Förg, *St. Etienne Photographs*

Günther Förg at Luhring, Augustine & Hodes, September 8 to October 1, 1988 — Born in 1952 — and only a year older than Steven Campbell, which shows how useless it is to speak of generations — Günther Förg is a German artist who works in a number of different mediums. He has made generic abstractions on canvas and metal as well as several series of photographs. He also takes special care over the installation of his work. In his earlier work, from 1982-83, he combined photographs of women with checks, stripes and grids, but lately these elements have been separated. Following a show of copper, lead and bronze paintings at the same gallery last spring, Förg has returned to New York with his photographer's hat on.

Known collectively as the "St. Etienne Photographs" — they were first shown at a museum in St. Etienne, France — his recent photographs are large scale, black and white pictures of women and buildings, with one exception in the shape of a framed mirror.

The buildings Förg chooses to photograph represent the conflicting ideologies at work in pre-Second World War Europe. He turns his camera on *Italian Fascist architecture*, *Bauhaus-style buildings* by Mies Van der Rohe, and the house in Vienna designed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. One hopes that Förg is not suggesting any kind of equivalency among these various styles or that if he is it is only insofar as all of the buildings he photographs must suffer the ravages of time. One is reminded of the architect Bernard Tschumi's statement that "the most architectural quality" of a certain building is its "state of decay."

Like his photographs of women, Förg's view of architecture is suffused with a wistful elegance. The fine grain quality of his tall, narrow prints seem to doubly aestheticize an already aesthetic architecture. That this architecture is also saturated with politics leads one to recall Walter Benjamin's capsule definition of Fascism and Communism: the former aestheticizes politics, while the latter politicizes aesthetics. But, in fact, Förg is doing neither. The ideologies that these buildings are reifications which flourished a long time ago, leaves Förg apparently saying that history and aesthetics are indistinguishable. And yet he leaves room for judgements to be made. Compared to the bombastic colonnades of Italian Fascist architecture, Wittgenstein's building is a paragon of sensitivity and intelligence, a well thought out yet fragile proposition. The light Förg captures flooding through a window gives the structure a religious overtone, pointing out its status as an article of doomed faith.

Like many contemporary German artists, Förg is adept at presenting objects which defy easy categorization, but in truth one is beginning to tire a little of all this fence-sitting. There is more to being an artist than good poise, more to making paintings than *intentional blandness*, more to photography than "significant" subjects attractively displayed. Work like this seems to suffer too much from a fear of doing the wrong thing which, I confess, is rather surprising given Förg's reputation as the bad boy of the German art scene. Nonetheless, there was a moment when Förg's mirror piece reflected a critic's face transfixed with interest so mild as to be indistinguishable from apathy.

Meyer Raphaël Rubinstein