

Mixology

An installation by Christine Siemens

The practice of art criticism is necessarily lodged on the consumer side of the exhibition business. In fact, the sort of art criticism that I myself practice is most properly described as "exhibition criticism," since I am almost always writing about works of art in bunches on the occasion of their public presentation. Criticism that deals with art in its generality is quite properly called theory; it is generally produced in universities; criticism that deals with singular works of art in their specificity falls within the purview of historical connoisseurship and is usually practiced under the auspices of museums and auction houses. The criticism that I write is written for periodicals about what the culture offers up to be seen—whenever and wherever it is offered up. It is understandable, then, that exhibition critics like myself, after years of dining on what the culture of galleries, museums and alternative spaces chooses to serve, would be tempted to intervene in the process, to move into the kitchen, or behind the bar, and whip up exhibitions of their own. The arguments against doing so, however, are numerous and persuasive.

First, of course, art critics habitually speak for themselves. They conceive themselves as private citizens with singular opinions striving to be heard within a cacophony of competing voices and opinions. They don't decide what we see, in other words. They only argue about whether it is worth seeing or not. Curators, however, do decide. They



Chrysanthemum 1999 Rubber-coated canvas, foam and fake fur 5' x 7' x 18"

include and exclude, and, as a consequence, the eccentric, combative tastes and opinions that constitute an art critic's abiding virtue, quickly become vices in curatorial practice. Critics have freedoms commensurate with their lack of power. Curators have responsibilities that derive from their actual power to exclude, so they must always see themselves, in some sense, as public servants. When two curators agree, their agreement is taken to represent a consensus of public taste. When two critics agree, one of them is redundant.

Thus, in much the same way that artists curated into exhibitions by theorists risk being seen as instruments of that theory, artists curated into exhibitions by critics risk too close an association with the eccentric visual agendas that are a critic's stock in trade. Criticism is a tough, specific practice; actual works of art are more protean and generous than that. Also, since a critic without enemies is not really a critic, critics who mount exhibitions are, in effect, sharing their enemies with their friends. So you have to be careful about why and where you do it.

Speaking for myself, whenever I am given the opportunity to curate an exhibition, I try to exploit the news gathering aspect of my practice. I think of my exhibition as concrete journalism—as dispatches from the trenches. My ideal curatorial statement, then, goes something

like this: Here is some stuff I found. Isn't it interesting. Excuse me while I get out of the way.

When I was offered the opportunity to curate an exhibition for Apex Art, however, I realized immediately that concrete journalism was out of the question. So I delayed and demurred. New York needs another curator like Vegas needs another hooker, and, also, having been a New Yorker myself for more than a decade, I am well acquainted with the city's tin ear for word from the outside world—and personally disinclined to shout into it. The inhabitants of Manhattan know what's best for them, and I know what's best for me, so I decided to go with that—to think of New York as a setting rather than an audience—to select an artist whom I wanted to see in New York and see what happened. Christine Siemens was my immediate and unhesitating choice.

I selected her first because I am delighted by, but do not understand, her art. I have no ready words for it, so nothing I might say or might have said can damage it. La Siemens possesses a critical sensibility that is passionately her own and totally invulnerable to any sideline kibbitzing. So I knew that, by presenting her with this project, I was sowing anonymous seeds in alien

Space Potatoes 1999 Cellulplast, tinfoil, canvas and wire 12' x 12' (approx.)




Sedation Shadows #1 1999 Pencil on paper 30" x 40"

soil—that I would be surprised rather than reassured by what sprouted up, and surprise is more fun than reassurance—and more New York. Moreover, as a Canadian transplant to Las Vegas, Siemens traffics in a brand of glamorous abjection (or abject glamour) that has always been part of New York's appeal for me. Her vision of culture perpetually rising out of nature and crumbling back into it seemed a good match with the city which is always crumbling down and rising from the dust.

Over the past few months, then, I have exercised my curatorial responsibilities by dropping my studio from time to time to see what was happening. What was happening was chrome potatoes, canvas chrysanthemums, disco-balls in deshabelle, bubble-wrap planets, and a tiny strobe-lit version of the gallery itself. When I asked what she was doing, she replied enigmatically, "Neurotic mixology." I nodded wisely, and in a small way I think I understand. Art making is, after all, a brand of jumped up bartending, but the stakes are very high. So, think of this exhibition as an exotic cocktail made out of the anxiety of making it. Or don't think at all, just drink it down.

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Disco Ball Solar System 1999 mixed media

March 18 - April 17, 1999

with an essay by
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