

arts

MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1983

\$4.00

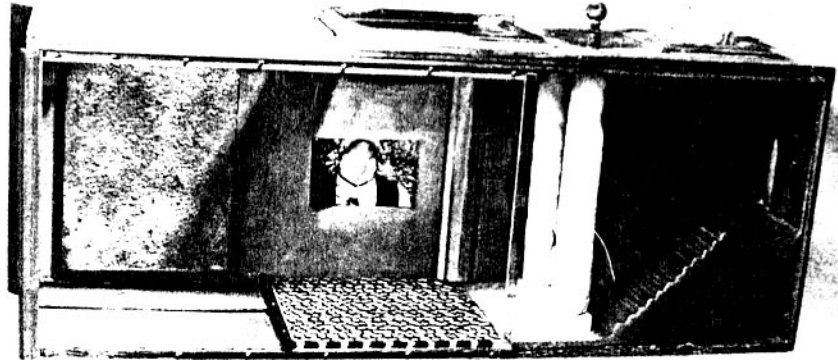
SUMMER GROUP SHOW

The summer show at Esta Robinson Gallery seems appropriate to the season. Three unrelated genres are presented without any ponderous connecting theme, simply to be sampled and enjoyed. The work of Joyce Abrams, Robert Smith, and Lawrence Warshaw has much to offer in the way of visual delights and provocative historical references; it is not fluff but a substantial aesthetic picnic.

Robert Smith's boxes are wall-mounted, with glass fronts through which the viewer peers into dimly lit interiors. They are furnished with figures and objects arranged with a Surrealist's flair for unlikely juxtapositions; a statuette of a couple bowling, for example, is dwarfed by tall spools of thread standing like columns nearby, in one of the little rooms inside a box. His interiors contain more than a disorienting mélange of objects arranged by chance, however, and in this way they defeat a Surrealist reading. In each piece he treats the decor and architecture with which we surround ourselves as a language, and by reducing the interior decoration of our homes and public buildings to a series of signs, he makes explicit some deeply rooted cultural norms.

Bathing Room is divided into two styles of decor. The upper portion makes reference to antiquity; light filters softly from overhead into a luxuriously appointed atrium. Imitation colored marble paneling, a convention of First Style in Roman painting, adorns the windowless walls. An air of richness, luxury, and an emphasis on the ritual aspects of the bath prevail in the upper portion, while the lower half contains the modern equivalent: a white tiled bathroom that bounces cold industrial light off its high-tech surfaces. By comparing the modern bath to its Roman equivalent, Smith exposes the trans-cultural meaning, as if to say, "This means the same as that."

Reminiscent of some mod-



Robert Smith, *Four Columns*, 1983. Mixed media, 14 x 37 x 9".
Courtesy Esta Robinson Gallery.

ernist art, notably Joseph Cornell's boxes and Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, Smith's pieces undercut modernist sentimentality with irony and a presentation of the structures of myth freed from any cultural particularity. His piece titled *Area Code 212*, for example, is a garish little disco sporting tiger-striped wallpaper, in which Halloween gremlins, dressed like devils and witches, rock in a blue haze. Smith's achievement is to make us see them as dancing at the Mudd Club and in some circle of Dante's *Purgatorio* simultaneously.

Lawrence Warshaw's three large painterly abstractions verge on prettiness, but are more mysterious and profound than they appear at first glance. Their strength lies in their polarity. Each is an atmospheric field of Olitski-like colored mist, changing in hue and intensity across the surface. In *Ninja*, the blue-violet along the left edge grades gently into a bright column of rosy peach light, then continues to change through the center of the canvas to cobalt violet, and finally to deep burgundy near the right edge.

Warshaw applies acrylic paint in vertical strokes that read as lines as well as being vehicles for color. The literalness of the brushwork returns our attention to the surface

and prevents the colors from atomizing into three-dimensional clouds. In this picture, the peach-colored area forms a vertical shaft of brilliant light, while the winey brown assumes the shape of a dark column, a shadowy presence that stands opposed to the bright beam. The fugue-like musical play between literalness and illusion, dark and light, vertical brushwork and horizontal color movement, provides the drama and tension of his paintings. His sensibility is Romantic; it has something of Wordsworth's feeling for the ecstatic qualities of light and that poet's suggestion that dark mysteries lurk horrifically in shadow.

Joyce Abrams' wall constructions function as autobiography on one level. She free-associates in plastic images around memories: of a particular beach house, of her study in architecture, of a brief Bauhaus infatuation, and of painting classes with Philip Guston and Charles Cajori. Yet her work recapitulates episodes in recent art history as well. In their dialogues with space, the pieces include the walls and even the rooms as parts, as do Stella's constructions (but without his bravado). Their geometry recalls Cubism and Mondrian, but it is softened by the relaxed brushwork of color-field painting.

And, like the kimono-inspired works she showed at the Nippon Club last year, these pieces refer to the bold gestures and flat shapes of Japanese art that became part of Western art history through Impressionism. Her pieces consist of basic building elements: white clapboards, tree branches tied together with twine, a few furring strips partially hammered together. She takes as her subject the process of constructing, the act itself.

In *Winter Night* a mannered abstract painting is incorporated as a structural element, its corner lifted to reveal its wooden support. Rather than attempt to mystify the viewer by obscuring the way in which her art was made, she exposes the process with complete candor. Yet the pieces present the tantalizing mystery of the urge to build that results in our grandest edifices. She isolates this impulse by exercising it at its most primitive level. By taking a few tree branches and boards and connecting them together, she comments on the history of architecture by examining its beginnings. Teepees, huts, and grand houses with many art-filled rooms all proceed from the urge embodied in Abrams' simple constructions. Her content is the evolution of that aspect of human intelligence that constructs a dwelling for survival to human imagination which manifests itself in mosques and pyramids and great cathedrals. (Esta Robinson, August 2-3)

Diana Morris