



Aimee Rankin, "Ecstasy," 1986-87, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Grant Taylor.

ARTFORUM

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Aimee Rankin Postmasters Gallery

For the works in this exhibition, "Ecstasy," Aimee Rankin used a format similar to that of her last year's show. Suspended from the wall at regular intervals were 13 boxes, the interiors of which are arranged with complex assemblages of miniature images and objects, and the exteriors covered with Formica in colors cued to their themes. Each box represents one "elemental" emotional state within the theme of passion, a division encompassing (to follow Rankin's narrative sequence) Attraction, Bliss, Perversity, Suffocation, Fury, Sex, Possession, Jealousy, Sadness, Cruelty, Fear, Loss, and Memory. These settings are accessible to the viewer/voyeur through two peepholes in the front of the boxes, while headphones plugged into smaller boxes below provide soundtracks of different pop tunes. The dense mélange of sounds, images, and objects, although apparently haphazard, is rigorously organized to present a matrix of associations related to each "element." Hence, the blue box entitled *Bliss*, 1986-87, contains (among other components) a "bed" of butterfly wings, an illuminated slide of a waterfall, a mirrored disco ball, feathers, seashells marbles, mirrors, and two framed reproductions of Bronzino's allegory *Venus, Cupid, Folly, Time*, ca. 1546.

Rankin's initiative, judging from her accompanying text, is to configure the ambiguities of ecstasy; through the barrage of bibelots in "this Disneyland of Desire" she would evoke our alternate attraction to and repulsion by extremes of erotic passion. But her text indicates another agenda as well: Rankin aims to restore the sensuous particularity of "real" experience to an esthetic activity that has been sanitized by the abstraction of theory, and chastizes theory for its dryness, its dull, unseductive surfaces, and for the prurience with which psychoanalytic theory in particular approaches the delirious fullness of eroticism. Rankin ascribes to her boxes the power of maintaining "the last remaining affective force found in sheer physicality." But she is also fraught with ambivalence, for her text is an amalgam of theoretical references garnered from Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, and (most heavily) Jean Baudrillard.

I sympathize with Rankin's predicament, which articulates an urge, common to many intellectuals, to respond to the dizzying scope of sexual pleasure while confirmed in the awareness of "knowing better." I also respect her desire to maintain the concrete specificity of experience against its evisceration in theoretical speculation. But the sensory overload of her boxes shipwrecks on one fundamental problem: the absence of a firm critical position that would make these works something other than collages of cultural artifacts, miniature monuments to sexual codes. The result is that "Ecstasy" offers no point of, or premise for, resistance to the suasions of cultural imposition: in-

stead, Rankin would make it all the more palpable, all the more "real." The problematic politics of her boxes arises from the fact that they maintain established sexual codes; they are not so much critical or deconstructive as depictive. She has taken fetish objects and turned them into clever catalogues that in themselves seem markedly fetishistic, demonstrating more than anything else the artist's obsessional enterprise in buying, stitching, stapling, and otherwise composing the myriad components of sexual display.

Rankin appears to be aware of her seeming acquiescence to the power of mass culture, and much of her text attempts to "explain" the attributes of her boxes by providing a theoretical reference for every structural element. The works suffocate in meaning through analogies that, moreover, seem inappropriate. For example, for the average viewer, the action of plugging in or removing the headphone from the boxes mimics an everyday mechanical activity: it probably doesn't function (as Rankin claims) "like Freud's 'Fort-Da Game,' as the repetitive reenactment of a symbolic presence and absence playing out the powerful implications of loss."

Rankin makes a valid point in "Ecstasy" about the need to consider mass culture without implacable distance from it. But the alternative need not be submersion, and intellectual perspectives are important. She might be right that (quoting from the song) there "ain't nothing like the real thing, baby," but there are limits to the illuminations of Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell.

—KATE LINKER

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