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MICHAEL KOHN GALLERY

# Switched-On Box

AIMEE RANKIN: "Ecstasy and Atrocity." At Michael Kohn Gallery, 313 N. Robertson Blvd., (213) 271-8505. Thru Aug. 27.

**T**hese days, Baby Boom artists fall loosely into two categories: 1) whiplashed by the sudden death of the avant-garde and bent on making parodic or nostalgic art as a postmortem for modernism; and 2) blissfully ignorant of formal, semiotic and political issues that have caused the above, periwiggling around as if the next Salon des Independents were just around the corner. Then there are the rare exceptions — people whose critical savvy isn't a formula for disastrously boring art — and New York assemblage artist Aimee Rankin is one of them.

Rankin makes miniature environments in closed boxes with eyeholes, earphones, and, in some cases, scent, that "turn on" at the touch of a button, and are glutted with obsessive imagery depicting given themes. Her art works on almost any level you want it to: If you're a minimalist, don't bother plugging in; the reductivist exteriors of these boxes will satisfy your purist appetite. If you're a surrealist, plug in, turn on, and watch a Bosch-like sensibility make mincemeat out of Joseph Cornell. If you're into semiotics, you can dredge up all the signification you want from the culturally charged artifacts inside — from mini TVs to Botticelli reproductions. The artist also enjoys the punning hum in the notion that she's a woman showing "boxes," one of which is lined with plaster-cast vaginas.

Perhaps the most interesting hitch to Rankin's work is that you have to enter her meticulously constructed world alone, and in some instances confront yourself reflected in it through mirrors and behind bars. Her imagery can be as quiet as butterfly wings, sand dollars and empty hourglasses (her "Theater of Love" series was inspired by her study of the sensual excesses of the 19th century) or, lately, as aggressive as syringes stuck in plastic eyeballs, devil-headed scorpions or

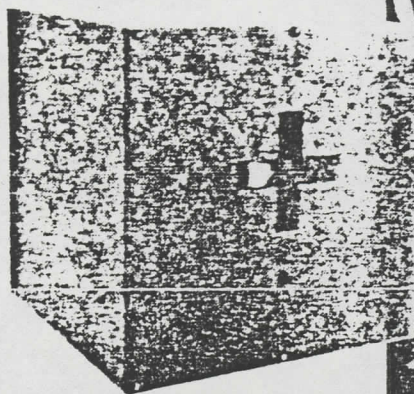
"girlie" playing cards speared on knives.

"I laugh at horror," Rankin explains, "not to trivialize it but to have some irony about it, to domesticate it." Rankin's personal horror, and the black humor that underscores much of her work, comes from the repeated rape and abuse her father subjected her to as a child and some tortured relationships that have resulted from it. She's hesitant to publicize her past, she says, "because I don't want everything I do to be reducible to that. The pieces are personal in that they're about states of being, but they don't necessarily have a specific personal reference."

"Indeed, the formal and cultural ingredients of Rankin's work are as powerful as its emotionally charged source. For her "Atrocity" series she used toys "because I was interested in what we're letting our kids play with: hybrid monsters, half-man, half-machine mutants, aliens, images of violence and sexuality." For six months she bought objects that "spoke" to her on that subject, and read *Fangoria* and *Scientific American* regularly ("because they're two sides of a coin") as well as sci-fi and horror classics, until the series was complete in her mind and she began its physical construction.

"I believe there's a way in which people can invest objects with a kind of subjective power," says Rankin. "Not like this crystal garbage where the object has an innate resonance, but more like primitive art, where someone has managed to penetrate many layers of rationality and tweak something very deep. That fetishistic resonance is one of the things my work is mining."

Rankin's current show includes pieces from her "Atrocity" and "Ecstasy" series as well as three new works, all of which dramatize the singular artistic vocabulary she's created by juggling extremes — of personal and public archetypes, seduction and repulsion, sincerity and irony, nature and artifice. And though Rankin doesn't force conclusions, she does muscle you into a self-conscious relationship with her art and, by association, with pop culture, art history and sheer human emotion. ■



## Art

by margot mifflin

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