

Aimee Rankin at Postmasters

The apertures in the nine boxes comprising "Atrocities," the title of Aimee Rankin's latest show, function as peepholes into a series of grotesque dioramas. Each is ornately furnished with props from the genre of gothic horror and accompanied by a suitably atmospheric sound track listened to via earphones. *The Flesh* is a gashed, nipples, pink-walled cell in which various wounds and organs are arranged around a translucent corpse. A penis rises from the floor. Behind it, a disembodied hand twitches and claws, and snagged above that, in a web of crisscrossed chains, hangs a single ear. The aperture is vagina-shaped, and the sound track includes porn-shop gasps of simulated ecstasy.

The Embrace is a glittering, icy assemblage. Two slender figures—Apollo and Daphne—are frozen in mid-chase. Nearby, obscenely red and slimy within a space of cold, white light and mirrored, glassy surfaces, a knot of worms spills out of a white basin attended by a pair of cupids. Behind them, mirrored to infinity, two skeletons embrace, while on the floor the numbers zero-zero read out from a series of digital clocks. The aperture is heart-shaped, the sound track a moody, experimental piece by the group SPK.

These elements—worms and wounds, skulls and monsters—are familiar motifs of gothic horror, emblems of mortality and corruption. Within the genre they function, for the living, as a vaccine warding off the fear of death. However, it is not this absorption with death that forms the central interest of "Atrocities," but the manner of its presentation, which Rankin has made something of a trademark. (The dioramas in one of her earlier exhibitions were concerned with the melodramat-

ic and obsessive world of 19th-century opera.)

Bending to the aperture, as in a peep show, one is brought into direct, private visual contact with the inside of the box, entering into a sort of fantasy identification, a suspension of the distinction between the "inside" realm and "outside" world of the viewer analogous to the suspension of disbelief required in gothic fiction. In many of the pieces this identification is intensified by the presence of reflective surfaces. The most vivid example of this is in *The Mirror* where the viewer's eyes are reflected back within a monstrous head (the image of an eye with a black square for a pupil is printed on the show's invitation card).

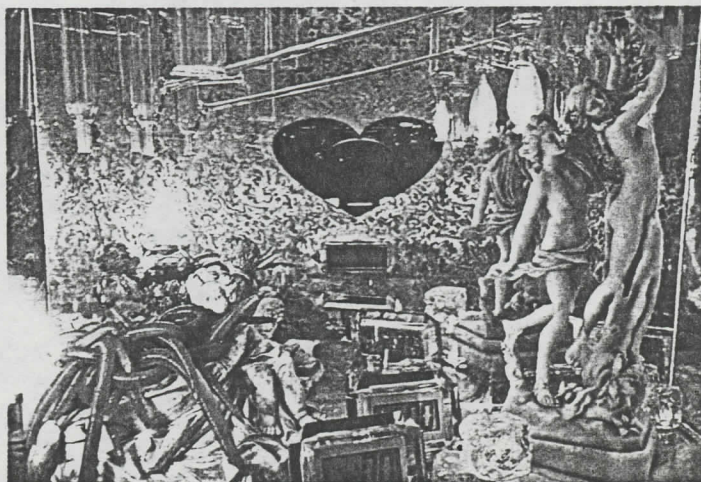
The deadly objects arranged in chilly elegance within the boxes are insinuated by way of the eye-like aperture into our own consciousness. The vivid impression we have of entering the eye of the box at the same time that the scene within the box enters our own eyes illustrates a recurrent theme in the gothic tradition—for example, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*—that death, the Outsider, is a constant presence inside. It is to our unwitting complicity with the death gestating inside us that these nine tableaux refer.

"Atrocities," as the word itself suggests, is concerned as well with the political and social dimensions of this complicity—our unspoken knowledge, in the artist's words, of the "global technologies of death" and the "monstrous underside of power." With irony and dark wit these grotesque tableaux address the perversely ambivalent fascination

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with which we view—in both literal and theoretical terms—our own extinction.

—Patrick McGrath



Aimee Rankin: interior of *The Embrace*, 1987-88, mixed medium assemblage, 22½ by 22½ by 22½ inches; at Postmasters.