

Aimee Rankin

POSTMASTERS

Despite its title 'Atrocities', Aimee Rankin's recent installation of wallbox dioramas evinced such devilish delight in the churning offal of mass culture that, with the possible exception of Clement Greenberg, no-one could really be miffed; outrage here would be tantamount to railing against Herman Munster. When Rankin hits on something potentially ersatz or degenerate, rather than stifling it, she'll mischievously repeat it ten times over. Formalism comes out looking priggish. This makes it easy to forget how lovingly each piece has been crafted. And savoured.

Rankin carefully planned her show as a complete package, from the announcement's close-up of an eyeball with square pupil (hip as square) to the wall labels done in stylized script over mirrors. As for each of the nine boxes: while the outside could have passed for a model of minimalist composure, on the inside all hell broke loose. The front faces featured two peepholes and a button which would play back unique soundtracks through built-in speakers. The interiors were treated as miniature prosce- nia. Through mirrors and lighting Rankin could effectively manipulate one's sense of their space. Concealment and compression gave her odd assortment of enclosed trinkets a special charge.

Each individual piece invoked a different theme. Elements drawn from affiliated cult genres like horror, sci-fi, sword and sorcery, S&M and heavy metal mutated into a generalized cyber-punk. In *The Flesh* the entire cubicle was wallpapered with fake skin replete with open wounds and oozing ulcers. Under the flickering of flame-shaped lightbulbs, an imposing penis guarded an only comparatively demure turd while an amputated rubber hand and tongue waggled obscenely to the tune of *Implant* by Psychic TV. *The Machine* proved to be a large, malevolent robot (one part Darth Vader, one part Alien) with a skull for a head. Before him pranced four tiny equestrian knights. Digital clocks made up the walls, test tubes the ceiling. *The Deep* plumbed the familiar reaches of a clichéd orientalism. Therein, a Kabuki song, *The Noble Prince*, set the stage for a klutzy wind-up Godzilla to grind away amidst an aqueous cavern of lava lamps, crystals, marbles, faux coral and, oddly, a Mad Ball — a kind of spongy rubber ball which sports a belligerent face. *The Mirror* elicited the most dramatic viewer interaction by setting one's own eyes behind an arcane mask hanging on the back wall of a Byzantine chamber whose mirrored walls opened out on to infinity.

Joseph Cornell and Lucas Samaras count as two obvious precedents for Rankin, although,

when it comes to fetishism, she parts ways completely. Where Cornell's compartments harbour a mawkish sentimentality. Rankin prefers trash. Where Samaras craves the genuinely exotic, Rankin trades on its banal currency. The bizarre economy of means (bizarre because thrown into reverse) of Ashley Bickerton's first wallboxes — which essentially repackage refuse — is ultimately much closer to Rankin conceptually.

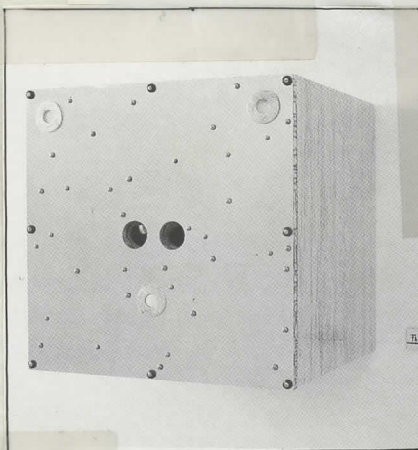
For her own part, Rankin converts longing for excess into a logical *cul-de-sac* by channelling it, not into the sublime anorexia of the transcendent, but rather into a ravenous appetite for everyday raunch. This is the liberating, anti-fascistic dynamic in her practice. While Frederic Jameson has criticized the vampiristic dependence of high art on the mass culture, Rankin manages to achieve a truly populist appeal without condescension. Accordingly, the distinction between high and low becomes relatively superfluous. Her work functions as a true pastiche wherein none of the elements are fully assimilated, but in which each instead obtrudes as an allegorical chunk. Impaling bondage playing cards on spikes in *The Game*, for instance, has to do less with the mortification of the flesh than with that of the sign. In this way, it's especially curious how literally Rankin defies Michael Fried's prohibition of theatre by turning hollow minimalist shells into veritable stage sets.

In spite of its deliberate recklessness, an

ardent longing distinguishes this work from the deconstructivist pap currently flooding the New York art scene. Given its pronounced material specificity, i.e., its resistance to documentation, its phenomenological inclusion of the viewer, its synesthesia, etc., Rankin's sculpture makes a quirky cartoon of the *real*. The artist herself has characterized this concept as 'the forgotten presence against which all representation is always doomed to fail', namely 'the mother's body, the original site of that all-encompassing plenitude from which the subject must struggle to emerge'. Here, paradoxically, Rankin's art develops a perverse formalism derived from the de-differentiation of the subject, not the determination of traditional artistic disciplines. (In this she is allied to the sculptor Debby Davis and, more recently, Cindy Sherman.) Not the least of its perverse aspects is the displacement of the maternal body by machines. Writing failure, not perfection, into the equation at the outset offers a refreshingly modest alternative to the overblown promises art viewers are now usually asked to entertain.

John Miller

<ARTSCRIBE · SEP/OCT '88>



Left:
Aimee Rankin *Atrocities* series *The Mirror* exterior
Mixed media 22" x 22" x 22"

Below:
Aimee Rankin *Atrocities* series *The Mirror* interior
Mixed media 22" x 22" x 22"



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