

FICTIVE VICTIMS

AN EXHIBITION OF NEW ART BY

GRETCHEN BENDER
PETER COATES
ANNE DORAN
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INTRODUCTION

My main objective in curating an exhibition for Hallwalls is to present new art that has not had extensive public exposure.

"Fictive Victims" is not an attempt to identify specific trends, but to present seven individuals' work that reflects the times and new ideas.

As the art wars rage and trends are promoted and diffused, these artists and others continue to work and evolve. For several of these artists this is their first public exhibition. They seem new to the public eye now, but it is only a matter of time before they are drafted into the mainstream.

They all warrant watching.

I would like to thank Valerie Smith for her time and attention in helping me organize the exhibition and for writing the essay. I would like to thank Hallwalls for the opportunity of presenting this exhibition, and finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank the seven artists in this show whose enthusiasm and cooperation has been essential.

Robert Longo

FICTIVE VICTIMS

by Valerie Smith

Partially in response to the nullifying effects of Pluralism's fallacious democracy, representation has advanced to inject ideological excitement into an otherwise diluted esthetic. In deference to much speculative criticism, contemporary representation does not signal a regressive authoritarianism, the political parallel of which has been dug up among such tendencies during fascist Germany and Italy. The notion that all "expressions of recognizability" should be lumped together in a confirmation of concurrent conservatism is one as dogmatic and parochial as its implication that abstraction is the only acceptable artistic alternative. For the industrial history of abstraction is testimony to its didactic nationalism, if not more so, than its figurative counterpart. That figuration is a traditional mode of expression by no means invalidates its significance, but gives the activity historical precedence.

As the art world pairs down to a dialectic and its members rush to take their place behind either opposing politic, a new generation with the advantage of a more peripheral perspective has come to realize that representation is abstraction's point of departure and that the ideological conflict between them is controlled and contained by the very factions themselves.

The seven artists chosen for this exhibition do not fall neatly under the categories of abstraction and figuration, but somewhere in between. This position combines the tentative with the self-consciousness of artistic preconceptions open for redefinition. One area to receive particular attention in recent years is commercialism's conditional generosity. As a target for channeling dissent, it is also one for exploitation. The cliché of false wealth becomes esthetically political when its dramatics are shifted from the didactics of the market place to that of self-sabotage.

But if the definition of cliché implies cultural absorption, the confusion of this condition through artistic manipulation does not assume the reversal of those conventions intrinsic to it simply because it has been reified. Rather, its ingression as a popular modernist idiom is another means of absorption. Hence, the cliché's potential for social change is undermined by the very activity that attempts to save it and give it a new function. This catch leads the artist down three possible roads. The first is an acceptance and exploitation of the phenomena of cultural assimilation. The second is resignation; though not necessarily apolitical, it is an acknowledgement of the seeming impossibility for political adjustment. It maintains the negative stance. The alternative for self-destruction is one which realizes the pretense of endowing new powers to old fictions; to then recognize the cliché, metaphor, allegory, etc. as limitations within which to describe others more internal.

Because of its accessibility and its excessive prominence, the photograph has become the most obvious and appropriate medium for developing a critical point of view. Gretchen Bender adopts this responsibility with

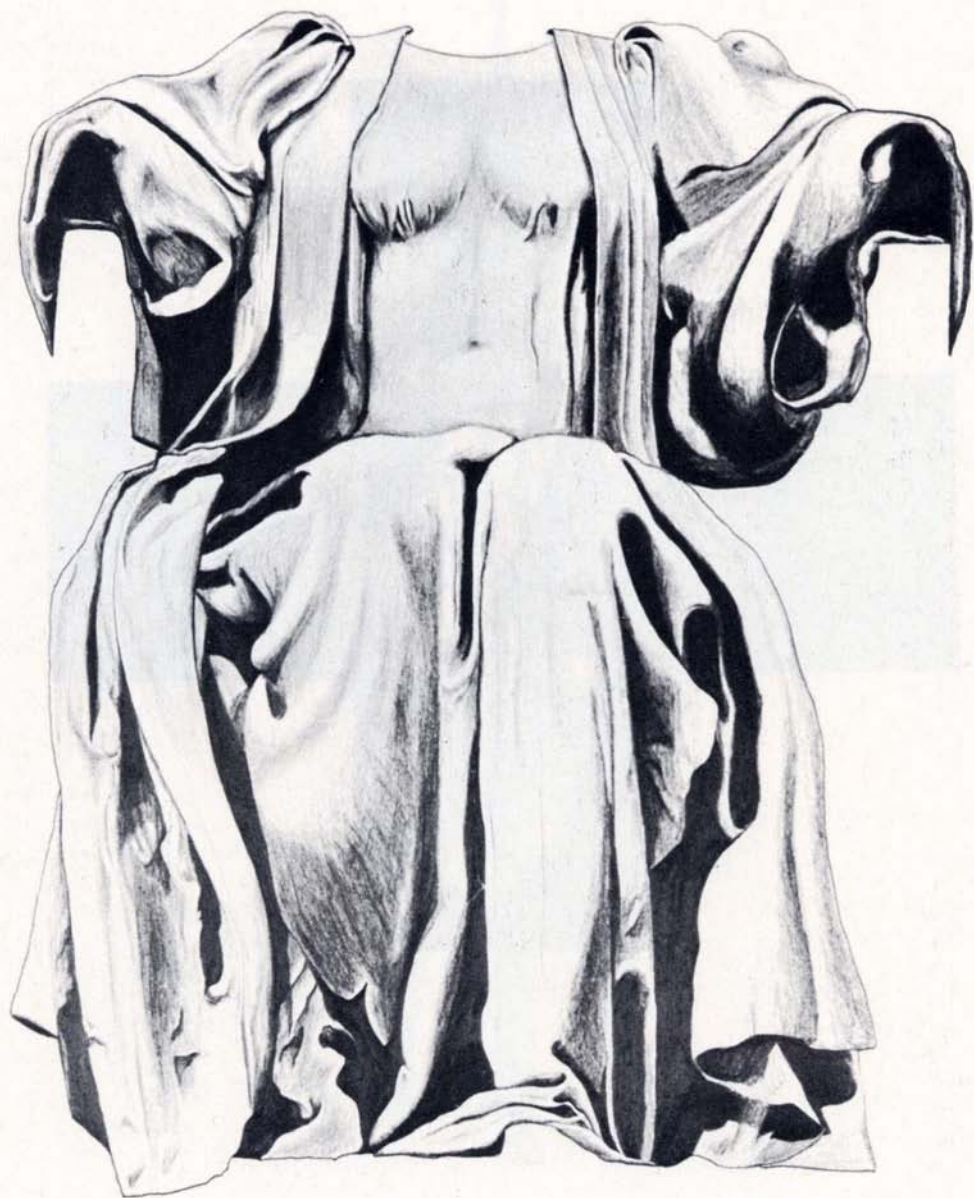


(foreground)
Gretchen Bender
Gargan I, 1981
wood with gloss lacquer finish
120" x 32" x 32"

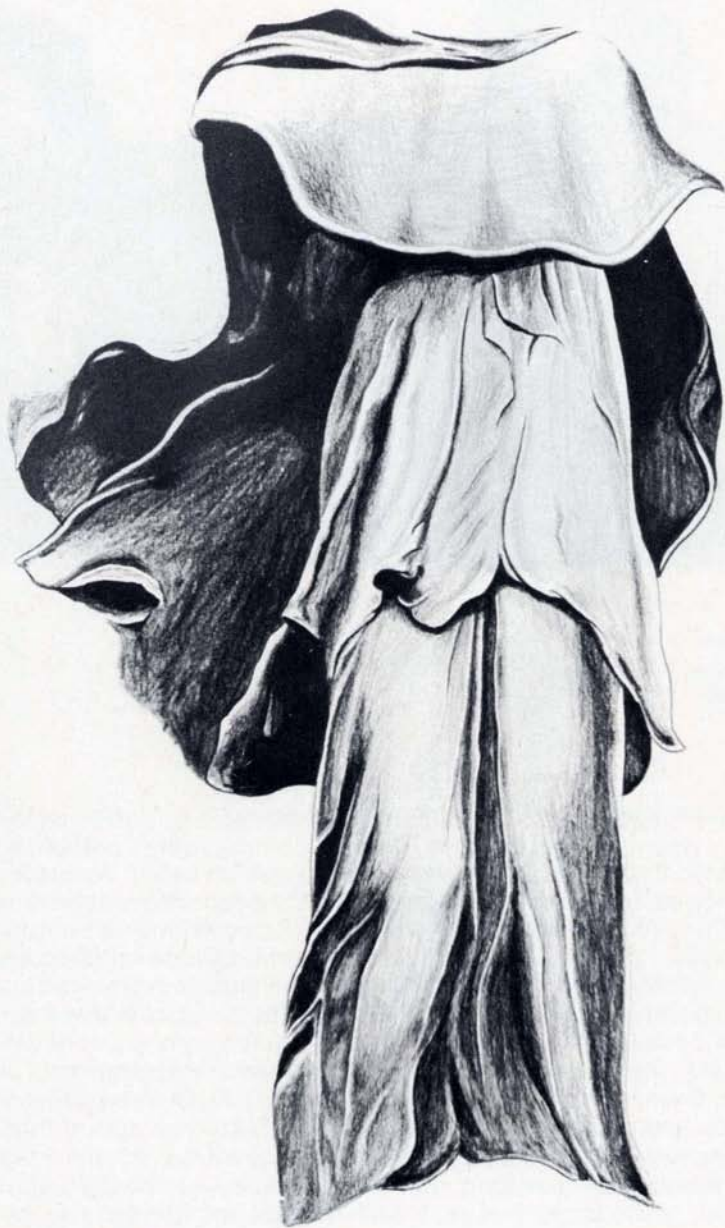
(background)
Gretchen Bender
untitled, 1981
Mixed media silkscreen
68" x 54"



Gretchen Bender
Black Cross, 1981
Mixed media silkscreen
5' x 5'



Peter Fleps
untitled, 1981
Graphite on paper
22" x 40"



Peter Fleps
untitled, 1981
Graphite on paper
22" x 40"



Peter Coates

Young Man Making Fun of a Bird, 1981
Graphite on paper
36" x 50"

photographic juxtapositions of disturbing corporate emblems and their human equivalents. Though the glossy commanding presence of her monuments contrast with the intimacy of the human faces, both symbolize a context of equally perfect corruption. Sharp seductive expressions flank implacable public minimalism; their exaggerated immediacy and special effects smattering of red on the mouth of the model who intices, perverts the erotic with sadistic horror. Bender's cynicism builds religious fervor as it reveals the human condition to be a self-inflicted social disease. A quiet desperation chisels the semblance of confidence into a capitalist facade. These images, from which we measure ourselves and the world, are here displayed in the same formalism that Bender rejects. Only by using the same structure can she expose its subliminal audacity for the device that it is.

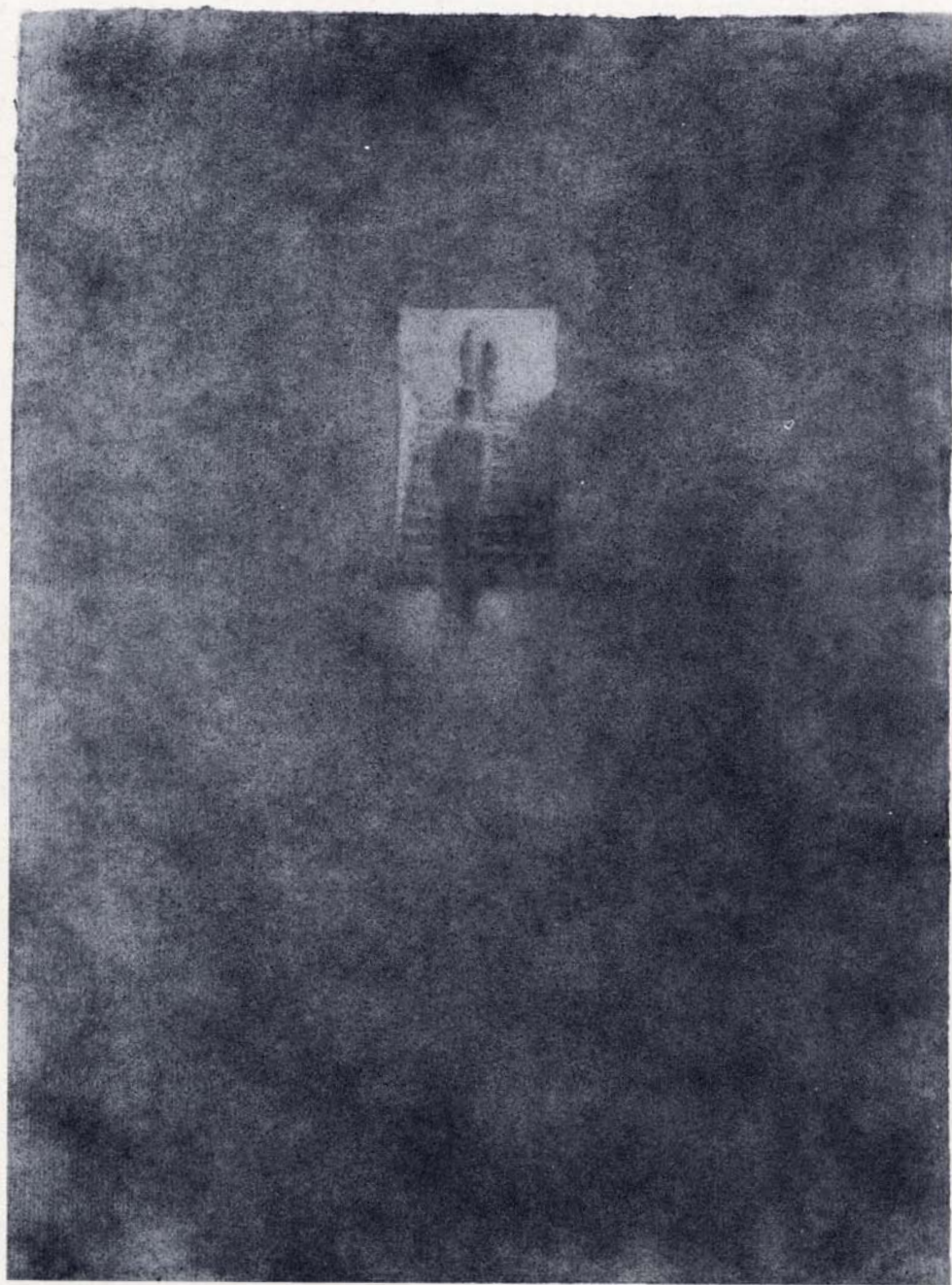
The affinity between Bender's representation and that of Peter Fleps' lies in their manipulation of common cultural symbols. As Bender attempts to question the "innocence" of our self-created institutions, Fleps mocks



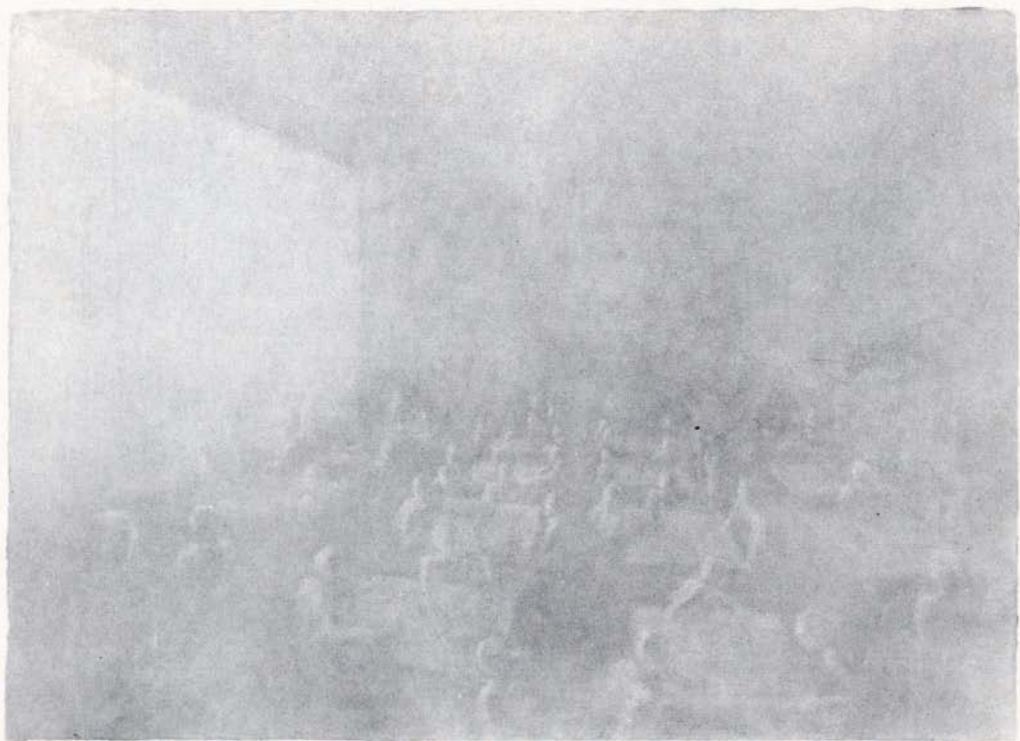
Peter Coates
Untitled, 1981
Graphite on paper
36" x 50"

civilization's exterior manifestations in the mythology that surrounds appearance and pose.

Fleps' current series of single statues are realistically drawn in a style mimetic of classical representation. By eliminating the distinguishing anatomical features of the figure, Fleps isolates and emphasizes the toga as a metaphor of the republic. Fleps is dealing with the social connotations of fashion: Classicalism is simply the quintessence of a historical instance where affectations alone suggest an entire system of thought. As a former conceptualist, Fleps is interested in art as idea. Following in his predecessors' footsteps, he shares their hierarchical attitude towards process, in the sense that someone better qualified to draw should execute them, as long as the idea is conveyed. Consequently, the work adopts an appropriately academic and systematic style indicative of the subject's rational stance. However, as intentionally incomplete figures an idiosyncrasy creeps in and counteracts the retentive manner in the drawings. The classical gesture without its reference becomes hollow formality, an ironic souvenir- a cliché.



Mark Innerst
Room With Exit to Ground Level, 1981
Flat black spray paint and charcoal on paper
26" x 17"



Mark Innerst

The Cafeteria Scene, 1981

Flat black spray paint and
charcoal on paper

27" x 17"

Courtesy of Jeffrey Fischer

What could be more effectively disturbing than the subversive exploitation of convention? The paradox involved in walking the line between this type of politic and blind self-indulgence that is a surfeit of parody or parody as style, contains the potential for jeopardizing the critical value of the image. The poverty of this position often yields to an increasingly fashionable cynicism. When cynicism folds into its own boredom, there cannot be progression or movement, except one prescribed in a contained esthetic. Peter Coates grapples with this problem by turning the patent qualities of serious popular figuration into a good laugh.

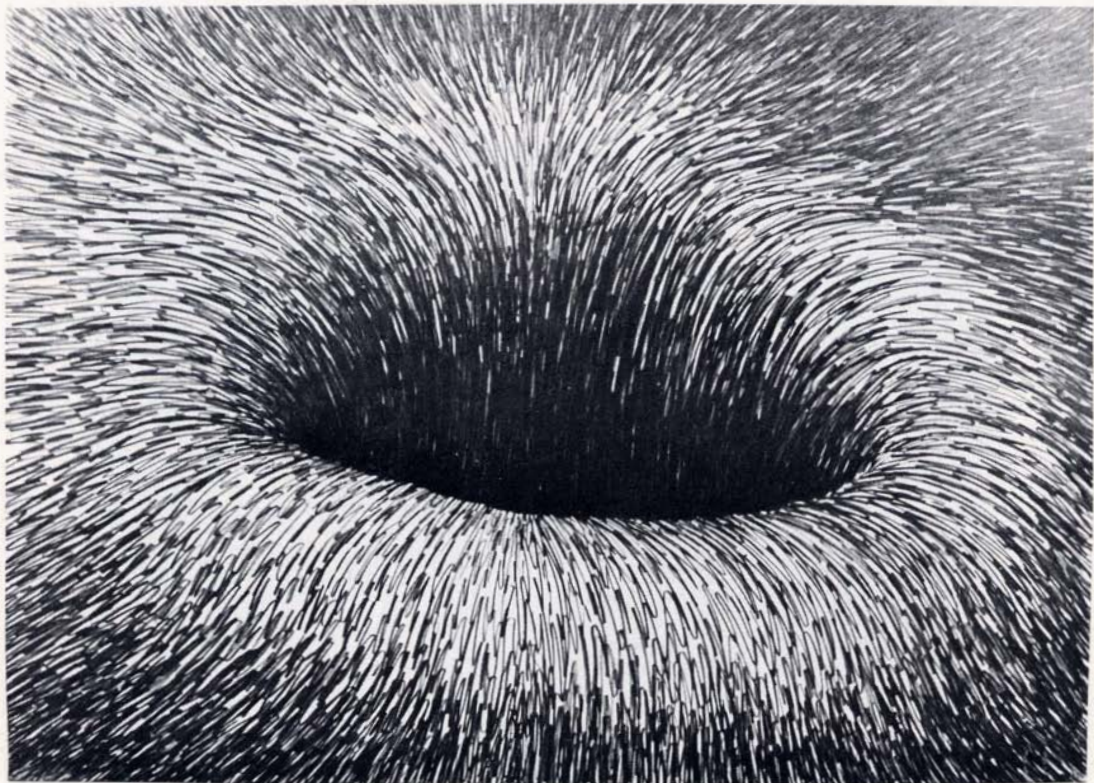
Rather than begin, like Fleps, with a depersonalized subject where humor enters almost inadvertantly, Coates chooses to make a point of self-parody right away, letting its obviousness carry the weight of the comedy. With the



Anne Doran
untitled, 1981
Pastel on paper
36" x 48"



Anne Doran
untitled, 1981
Pastel on paper
36" x 48"



Bill Komoski
untitled, 1981
Graphite on Paper
22" x 30"

Bill Komoski

The deepest hole sucks in the ground around it, then doubles back on itself like a geyser. Thousands of sparks spray across the surface towards the opening. The sparks move effortlessly through the body like a perpetual motion moebius strip. The light projected defines the allies that surround the body. Their allegiances in flux, they scramble for position.



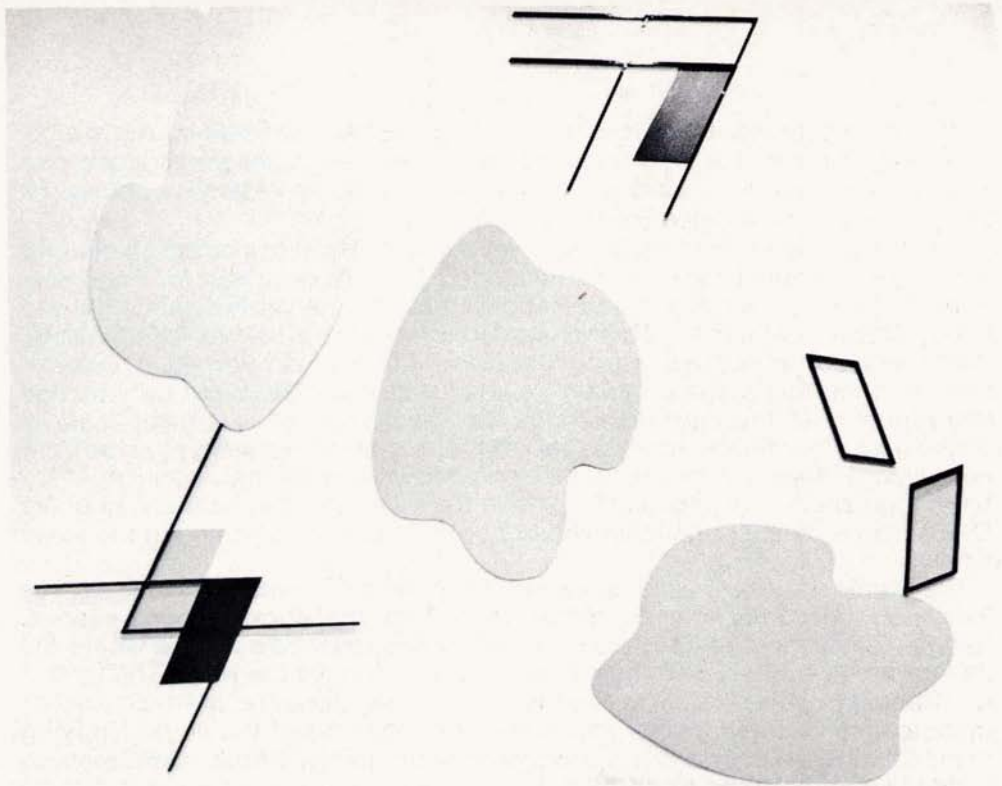
Bill Komoski
untitled, 1981
Graphite on paper
50" x 38"



Jim Isermann
Patio Tempo, 1981
Life size
Enamel paint on wood

same sordid incredulity that runs through the best of the bad horror films, Coates lifts sections from various snap shots to build a composition, the theatricality of which confounds the ridiculous for the romantic. Extending the comic, Coates tucks a disguised message in his humor, indicative of the best forms of parody.

Of the seven artists, Mark Innerst is the most interested in the issue of distance. This is in fact the subject of his representations. To convey this aspect of remoteness, Innerst uses photographic negatives as a contrivance. However the photographs are not literally transcribed in the idiom of contemporary figurative practice. The images are simply drawn from memory, consciously confusing the difference between a personal reality and illusion. The subtractive process of erasing figures until they appear from the graphite surface contributes toward the mood of interminable suspension in the



Jim Isermann
untitled, 1980
13' x 15' on wall

context of the pictorial situation. It is for this reason that Innerst is fond of depicting windows, doors and hallways through which the activity of the viewer is imitated. The isolation of the figure, the infinite space, the neutralizing effect of the medium and the deferred communication between the figures are so sincere as visual codes that it would be meaningless to continue to extrapolate. It suffices to conclude that Innerst's art is one of innuendo and reticence, and his portrait of painful tranquility a foil for familiar fears.

The sensibility of the last three artists diverges somewhat radically from the first four. Their loose abstract style of representation offers an iconography associated with psychological rather than universal images. There is also a physical quality to their drawings as a direct result of their three dimensional work. In general, the images tend to be raw, cathartic, immediate and dense. Such adjectives are familiar to the recent burst of neo-expressionism in North America and Europe. Although the painterly practices that dominate the canvases of the expressionist mode are not at issue here, the attitude towards production in these three artists, in terms of scale, color, pattern and form, is

similar. The aggressive result of their procedures usurps the attention usually reserved for the image. In this case, however, gesture takes precedence, elevating style to the equivalent of content. In so doing expression becomes the reference and the images are the vehicle.

Anne Doran is a hybrid cartoonist. Her small reliefs of truncated bodies and miniature environments hint at little stories. Doran's penchant for fragments transforms her constructs into quotations that are undeniably sentimental and telling. Because and in spite of the special cathexis the artist has for her reliefs, their personal narratives easily translate into cliché. For each colorful reminiscence the image outlines, a partial colloquialism might be attached that signals nostalgia and hence regret. The autobiographic is the ultimate in cliché. Her attraction to analysis and the repetition of thematic phrases from her constructions are the mechanics of a personal motif that should not only be recognizable to all who participate in the mundane, but have a way of (as David Bowie, lyricist of cliché, would put it) "...always crashing in the same car."

Bill Komoski also has a selection of ideas from which he delves. His extremely corporeal images, made up of lines that form bulbous shapes, hedges fetishism. The lines are persistently obsessive to a degree where the images are secondary and their linearity the reason for the work. The format for Komoski's presentation is like that of Gretchen Bender's, in which a set of dichotomies dictates the structure and the meaning of the work. Unifying these ideological divisions is a constant methodology whose relentlessness yields like all patterns to an *idée fixe*, a repetition because it can never be resolved. Though Komoski's linear signature style provides the freedom to allow him to create images of infinity, it is like all languages, the proverbial mold that frames that freedom.

When the resuscitation of an outmoded iconography transcends mere obsession and no longer functions as illusion safely within the parameters of esthetic expression, it becomes in fact a life style. Jim Isermann has taken his art to this extreme. His appropriation of the designs of the 1950's is not limited to the decorative motifs that animated many motel walls during that period. It extends to the concept of the total environment and the social implications that *amorphous cloud shapes and pastel colored plastic* had for the consumers who bought them. Concurrent with technological advancement and the alleviation of familial and individual traditional mores, was the necessity for a new market to satisfy this liberation. Isermann's romance with the fifties is nostalgia for a decade when jazzed eclecticism was a language that reflected the release of innovation and the personal philosophy to go with it. These "happy" forms are the emblems of economic prosperity, samples of what became a burgeoning publicity industry and the start of a commercial culture. As a pirate of materialism at its peak, Isermann entertains the idea of modernism as history for the taking. If for this reason alone, his work best exemplifies the radical participation in the fantasy where fiction and non-fiction become indistinguishable.

