

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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LAST CHANCE

A Vivid Potpourri With Carnage at Its Core and an Aside of Transcendentalism

By KEN JOHNSON

Love it, hate it or grudgingly respect it, Thomas Hirschhorn's politically punishing horror show, "Superficial Engagement," at Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea is hands down the most disturbing and provocative art exhibition in town right now.

Mr. Hirschhorn is a Swiss artist based in Paris who has lately been much in demand by ambitious museum curators and international art expo organizers. He is known for sprawling, messy, aggressively didactic installations made from great quantities of cardboard, tape, aluminum foil, photocopies and found objects. For his last show at Gladstone, he created within the gallery a transporting network of cardboard caves. It included a lot of photocopied political literature, but visitors could ignore the social studies and just enjoy the funhouse-like experience and the fantasy of an underground counter-culture.

Thomas Hirschhorn's "Superficial Engagement" continues through Saturday at Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Chelsea, (212) 206-9300.



David Reizen/Gladstone Gallery

A view of "Superficial Engagement" at Gladstone Gallery.

own written statement about the show.

Mr. Hirschhorn thinks we need to pay more attention to the surfaces of things. "Superficial engagement is not nonengagement!" he writes. "Let's keep things on the surface,

Superficial Engagement

Gladstone Gallery

With this show Mr. Hirschhorn evidently decided to take off the gloves. He has crammed into the gallery a series of sculptural tableaux that resemble parade floats constructed by a gang of neo-punk high school anarchists. With mannequins studded with screws like African fetishes, fake coffins, video monitors, photocopied newspaper headlines and articles, Oriental carpets, hand-painted banners and photocopies of geometric artworks, the installation is almost overwhelmingly congested.

But one element stands out clearly: thrusting at you from every direction are images copied from the Internet and other international news sources showing human bodies mangled, burned and dismembered by bombs in Iraq, Afghanistan and other theaters of war and terror.

Another dimension runs parallel to the atrocity photographs: throughout the show Mr. Hirschhorn has placed blurry and washed-out photocopies of drawings by Emma Kunz, the Swiss artist and mystic who created beautiful mandala-like composi-

let's take the surface seriously!" It is a persuasive argument. All too often, ideologies, metaphysics and religions that find truths above, below or beyond observable surface realities cause trouble and pain because they so easily justify bad behavior toward nonbelievers and other inconvenient populations.

But what about the high-low tension between the ethereal Kunz drawings and the horrifying photographs? The juxtaposition does not seem to stick to surface realities, and it is not clear what Mr. Hirschhorn means by it. Is he saying we need more beneficent transcendentalism to heal ourselves and our world? Or does he think that rationalism is useless in the face of real-world violence? And doesn't the sight of mangled corpses tend to inflame cycles of revenge, rather than put people off violence?

For all its brutal obviousness and faux-populism, there is something deeply confused and confusing about Mr. Hirschhorn's project. You may suspect that he is unconsciously masking a deeper sense of uncertainty and helplessness by putting on such a vigorously distracting show.

This is the third major exhibition this season by a male artist throwing

tions, which she used in her practice as a healer. Taped to cardboard and plywood panels of various sizes, many of which are suspended and angled toward the viewer, the drawings set up a tension between creative transcendentalism and earth-bound carnage.

But the poor-quality photocopies of the Kunz drawings do little to mitigate the general feeling of chaos. In this context, they look more like kitschy designs than spiritually resonant artworks. The question remains: to what end has Mr. Hirschhorn orchestrated this assaultive mix of horrifying imagery, ugly materials and crude agitprop? Is he being sincerely expressive or, considering a dark and possibly nihilistic comedic strand running through the show, might he be mocking a kind of sophomoric populist politics? Or is he just trying to make the sort of people who visit Chelsea art galleries feel bad about their comfort and privilege?

For people who get their news only from American sources, which rarely show such grisly documents, the show may be an eye-opener. And that would be consistent with the purposes expressed by the title "Superficial Engagement" and by the artist's

everything but the kitchen sink into the gallery without regard for aesthetic niceties. Mike Kelley recently filled Gagosian Gallery with a similarly immersive, albeit conceptually obscure series of theatrical tableaux imitating high school theater productions. And at P.S. 1, John Kessler presented an entertaining, enveloping installation of motorized contraptions and videos focused on protesting the United States involvement in Iraq.

All three shows seem at least partly animated by desperation, as though the artists had been driven into arm-waving frenzies of impotent rage by the inability of traditional art forms to address adequately the terrible and infuriating things that are going on in the world.

Mr. Kelley and Mr. Kessler, at least, appear to have had some fun. In Mr. Hirschhorn's show, a puritanical fervor rules out fun and pleasure. He bullies the viewer and induces a vague, free-floating guilt; he's the art world's Lars von Trier. Few artists have taken so seriously Theodor Adorno's famous admonition that creating poetry should be impossible after the Holocaust. It is scary to think what Mr. Hirschhorn might do next.