

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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ART REVIEW

Finding Yarns in Video Imagery

By ROBERTA SMITH

In the wave of German artists that washed over Manhattan in the 1980's, Rosemarie Trockel, whose fifth solo exhibition in New York is at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, was exceptional for being neither Neo-Expressionist nor male. The works for which she became known here seemed to celebrate this fact: they were Minimalist paintings made on knitting machines that insinuated notions of domesticity, everyday life and women's work into the sacred realm of high art.

Ms. Trockel's knit surfaces sometimes suggested expanded ski sweaters, but their patterns included everything from snowflakes to Playboy bunnies to swastikas. Others, more resolutely esthetic in their stripes and dots, amounted to fuzzy versions of Op Art. A few simply presented the wool industry's Woolmark logo showing coiled yarn.

The knitted paintings were only the tip of the iceberg of Ms. Trockel's whimsical, elegant, politically astute art. Although the extent of her activities is still not well known in the United States, she turned out to be nearly as polymorphous as some of her male colleagues, although usually with a feminist twist.

A beautiful Projects exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1988 proved her skill at deft improvisa-

tional drawings. She also made sculptures, some a little too Beuys-like for their own good, others sharply original, for example, a series of abbreviated white enamel stoves with blank burners that like the knit paintings did not fulfill their traditional function but instead implied the feminine while hovering provocatively at Minimalism's borders. Still other sculptures consisted of casts of seashells or sleeping (or drunken) animals.

The interest in the natural world began during Ms. Trockel's art-school days in the late 1970's when she made Super 8 films of animals. Last summer, she and another German artist, Carsten Höller, collaborated on an installation in one of the outbuildings at the Documenta X exhibition in Kassel, Germany: it was a pigpen complete with sow and offspring and a bleacher-type ramp on which visitors could sit or recline while watching them. The work seemed to measure our distance from nature by presenting it as entertainment, spectacle and performance, but it was also endearingly immediate.

Since the late 1980's, Ms. Trockel has returned increasingly to the moving image, devoting nearly all her energy to video. The show at Gladstone amounts to a lively partial retrospective in this medium, with 12 videotapes from 1989-97 displayed on monitors suspended in rows over-

head, forming a single installation piece. "Yvonne," an ambitious autobiographical collage of still and moving video images projected on a wall in an adjacent gallery, is new this year. In it, the artist's friends — infants, children and adults alike — are shown in various modes of relaxation or play. Their clothes, which are usually knit and somewhat eccentric, have been made by the artist.

At the other extreme, also new and also projected large, is a nearly abstract film called "Tweedle" in which strands of yarn jump and twist to bouncy musical accompaniment, like an early experiment in avant-garde animation.

And a kind of afterthought that affirms the artist's penchant for open-ended works whose meaning she refuses to pin down is a nearly life-size cement sculpture of a sleeping elf with a large nose. A well-known character from German folk tales, he has magic powers when he touches that nose. The work is rife with metaphorical possibilities, especially for a female artist known for tweaking artistic (male) pretension, but Ms. Trockel lets sleeping dogs lie.

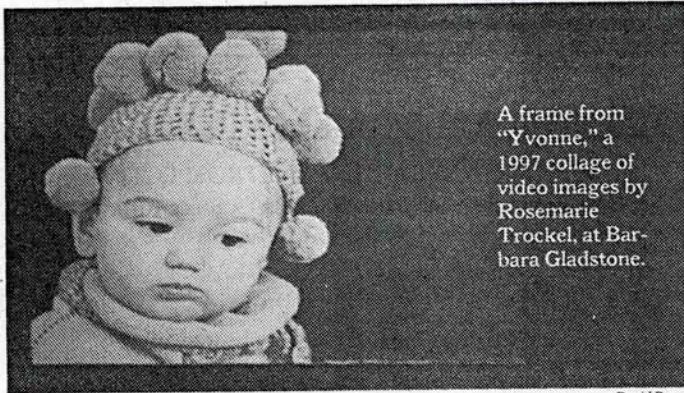
The show makes you think that the knitted works and all their formal and social implications remain at the core of Ms. Trockel's art, running through it, sometimes literally, like a connecting thread. Clothing as both a universal human condition and per-

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A frame from
"Yvonne," a
1997 collage of
video images by
Rosemarie
Trockel, at Bar-
bara Gladstone.

David Regen

sonal expression becomes increasingly prominent as a theme in "Yvonne," especially in the finale, where many of the outfits worn in the video flash past, disembodied and isolated on a white ground.

But thread is a line that can take Ms. Trockel back to nature, as in "Parade," where the marching tendencies of a certain breed of silk worm (they travel in nose-to-tail rows) generate animated abstract patterns. Also included is a short sped-up tape of a moth eating its way through a sweater; running forward and then in reverse, it makes the insect appear to repeatedly make and then repair gaping holes, like an artist drawing and then erasing or a sinner indulging and then repenting.

The penchant for tiny increments that add up to large forms, so evident in the works involving knitting, is also manifest in "nature" films like "Naples," in which huge flocks of birds drift rhythmically across the

screen like so many magically controlled flecks, and in "Ants," which focuses on a single insect whose movements are doubled by the use of a split screen.

It must be said that the group presentation of the dozen videos is sometimes confusing. Longer narrative videos, like "To Balthasar, Age 6," a dramatic work in which a girl and boy encounter death in the form of a rabbit-snatching hawk on the way home from school, get lost in the shuffle. But overall the interplay between themes and images is illuminating. It suggests that it is in video that the disparate threads of Ms. Trockel's work are not only being brought together but expanded and enriched as well.

Rosemarie Trockel's work remains at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Chelsea, through Oct. 15.