

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Berkson, Bill. "Rosemarie Trockel at the University Art Museum." *Art in America*. February 1992.

Rosemarie Trockel at the University Art Museum

At 39, Trockel is already a historic figure in her German homeland. Seeing her work's capaciousness articulated in this large traveling retrospective left one mulling the prospect of a pressurized intelligence that can take on a checklist of topically urgent, largely gender-sensitive themes, deal jauntily among the terms of each and still have plenty left to insinuate. At the start of the installation lay bronze casts of three dead animals—two dogs and a deer—strewn across the gallery carpet like institutional road kill. In the show's attentive continuum, a Muzak of aseptic presentation is crosscut with such organic noise.

Trockel's conceptual follow-through happens subtly apace, with a particularizing orderliness, so that, for the viewer, abrasive silences and manic laughter bubble up at intervals you think could

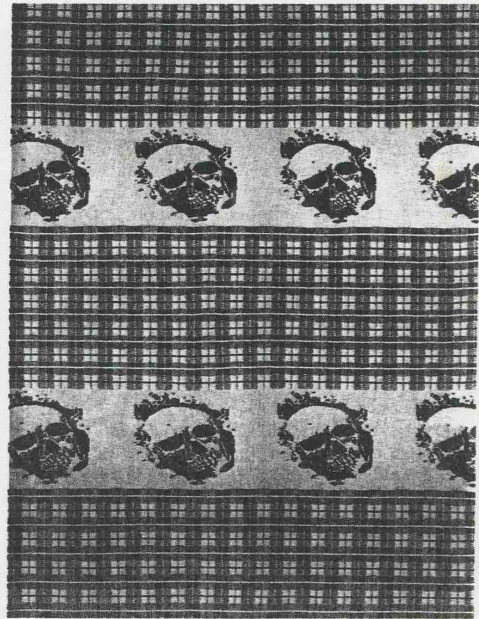
be clocked. They can't; Trockel's like a Kafka or Kleist in that department: the disturbances that arise from inspecting her set pieces aren't telegraphed by the ways she's arranged them. Her typical display-case conceit implies hermetic discretion along with a lengthy pun about museological containment and window shopping. These melancholy facets of steel and glass, like the metal cubes and stretcher bars in other pieces, stake out a geometer's dreamscape.

Each vitrine houses one or more of Trockel's speculative-appliance kits, succinct as nursery rhymes and just as variously menacing or nonsensical: a parchment-dry pig bladder and brass wire funnel hung above a small dark hole in the base; a live spider cohabiting with a white shirt, a packing pin neatly transecting the breast; a set of five hellishly imprinted ski masks, all upright and empty, their bare slits suggestive of hand-puppet mouths. The symbolic raw edges of miscast (e.g., commodified or sexually pinpointed) identities languish or ricochet, are shattered, mourned, transmuted or fused. Beyond the constituent meanings—biological, economic or both—lie puzzles of extra intentions and transfinite depths. Where monumentality occurs, it is exact, not showy, a cenotaphic fullness.

Trockel's best-known works, the computerized knit paintings, have an additional fullness—the kind that repetition makes as if drumming over an abyss. The slight sags the fabrics take along their horizontals permit few precise straight lines, so their logo-riddled surfaces spread somewhat clownishly. Knitted or woven images are nothing new, but advancing them as conceptual

objects is novel and effects a raid along the feminine/masculine divide. *Untitled (Please Do Nothing To Me, but Quickly)*, 1989, succeeds in deepening gender politics with an erotic charge. Ten, maybe 20 years ago, these paradoxically chill mural-samplers would have been called "seductive"; as it is, in thought and presence they're voluptuous, which Trockel probably intended as part of their critical weight. As well as any of her more nettlesome productions the knits slyly address a baleful compression in our psycho-social climate, where taking care of business—the dusting off of a determined meaning, for instance—is just one step short of delirium.

—Bill Berkson



Rosemarie Trockel: *Untitled*, 1990, wool, 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 59 inches; at the University Art Museum.