Tales from the Dark Side

The German artist Rosemarie Trockel employs a protean range of forms—knitted panels, arrangements of objects, sculpture, photographic works—in an art that is consistently enigmatic and disturbing.

BY KEN JOHNSON
GLADSTONE GALLERY


You could easily imagine a young American making a whole career out of those machine-knitted woolen panels that first drew attention on this side of the Atlantic to the German artist Rosemarie Trockel. Timed perfectly to coincide with the rise of Baudrillardism, they were suggestive at all the right levels: they simulated commercial products; they were insidiously political in using hammer and sickles, swastikas, Playboy bunnies or corporate logos as anonymously repeated pattern units; they were feminist in asserting a traditional, albeit now computerized, woman’s craft; and they were ironic, Neo-Geo-like parodies of the gridlocked esthetics of modernism.

But Trockel wasted no time in serving notice that she would not be typecast. Her first solo exhibition in New York (one of the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art [see *A.I.A.,* Apr. ’88]) not only excluded the knits, but projected an entirely different sensibility from what you might have expected. A series of more than 80 diaristic doodles on throwaway pieces of paper and two sculptures featuring small, bizarre monsters made her seem more an Expressionist/Surrealist obsessed with matters of sexual and religious perversity than a cool postmodernist.

Most recently, in her first one-person show in a New York commercial gallery (Barbara Gladstone), Trockel showed even more facets of her oeuvre. There were six beautifully though not showily
Like Beuys, Trockel is an artist of immense intellectual ambition, whose works take in an entire range of possibilities—from personal mythology to politics and world history.

Incrustable, private obsessions of personal mythology.

As if to further compound uncertainty about exactly what kind of artist she is, the assemblages Trockel showed strike the viewer immediately as puzzles. You get the tantalizing feeling that you ought to be able to figure them out, as though they were riddles or decodable rebuses. Take, for instance, Das Intrus Legere durch die Sonderegotic—a sheet of paper unfolded accordion-wise displays six Xeroxed images of Gothic stone-carved female heads, which may be identified as six of the seven Foolish Virgins of New Testament notoriety. One end of this paper is attached to a small cardboard box that has a circular hole in its lid and the name “Trockel” printed on it. The title, printed below that, seems to promise that Aquinas’s “Intrus Legere”—roughly, “complete or total understanding”—may be found “durch die Sonderegotic”—“through the mannerist Gothic style.” Standing in front of the box is a modern-day reliquary, a life-size silver finger (Trockel’s) done in the Gothic style. As the hole in the box is exactly proportioned to accommodate the finger, you have a comic, Freudian pun equating spiritual revelation to sexual penetration by the finger/phallos.

Another piece that puns on sexuality and spirituality presents two similar antique coiled springs with a box for storing them. It’s a baffling array until you learn (as I did from a gallery staffer) that the pair of springs was a patented, turn-of-the-century American invention that demonstrated the existence of God when, by screwing motion (!), the one, representing the mind of God, was made to interpenetrate with the other, which represented human consciousness. Irony, though, the interior of the box is patterned with Wittgenstein’s famous phrase, “Ich kenne mich nicht aus” (“I’m stumped”), a nice commentary on the ways of faith.

The pun is indeed one of Trockel’s favorite devices. It turns up in a slyly simple way in one untitled work, a simple white dress shirt hanging in a vertical glass vitrine. The shirt’s seemingly innocent designer label reads “Justine Juliette/collection désir,” and you may pause a few beats before getting the allusion to the heroines of de Sade, which thereby evokes ideas about erotic perversion and French fashion fetishism.

The pun can work in a more sinister way, too, as in what is perhaps the show’s most viscerally powerful piece, which features a pair of strange antique weapons installed in a vitrine. Identical in shape if not in size (one’s about four feet long, the other about three), each has a wooden handle attached to a thick iron shaft which ends in a cross. The members of the cross taper to menacing points, so the object might be either a mace or a kind of harpoon. Given that the cross is also a symbol of Christianity, and that its cruel business end lies on a thin pillow labeled “Vendetta,” a darkly unsettling association between violence and the spiritually and politically aggressive expansionism of the West’s primary orthodox religion is implied.

Two other vitrine works, however, submit less readily to such neat speculative deciphering. At the center of one is a plaster cast of a human leg, cut off below the knee and above the ankle. A silver bracelet encircles the leg near the ankle, and flanking it are two logs of similar size and shape. At one end of the case are some empty cardboard slipsowers for four volumes of an encyclopedia. These are
straddled by a wooden bridge structure from which dangles a key. At
the vitrine’s other end, there’s a square of foam rubber, on which is
displayed a cutout of the familiar optical-trick image that reads as a
duck from one viewpoint and a rabbit from the other.

You may be hard-pressed to make absolute sense out of such a
disparate collection of objects, although here and there you will find
flickering hints. There’s the leg/limb or leg/log pun; the key may be
for unlocking the knowledge of the encyclopedias, the volume
numbers of which produce the date “1662,” the year of Trockel’s birth;
the rabbit/duck may signal the ambiguity that pervades Trockel’s
art.

The other vitrine contains four major elements. At one end is an
inflated white balloon, made from a pig’s bladder, which has a
simple cartoon face drawn on it. It hangs from the roof of the case
above a black-painted floor which has been drilled with a small hole.
In the case’s other half is another Justine/Juliette shirt, this one
neatly folded between two masonite cubes and under a length of
dark-pink hose that connects the cubes. Finally, there’s a sign
printed with the word “Bubikopfschnider,” a term referring to a
boy’s-style haircut sported by liberated German women of the
1920s.

In this piece, a structure of oppositions is evident. The lighter-than-air volume of the bladder head contrasts with the dark floor
and the form-crushing black hole below. And the box-ed in shirt,
representing female masochism under the phallic thumb (the pink
hose) of male domination is juxtaposed with the sign of feminist
independence. But still an overall coherent meaning eludes one’s
grasp. Like dreams, these hermetic works tease the line between
sense and nonsense, inviting and resisting interpretation and thwarting
the analytical intellect’s need for certainty.

But the word “Bebikopfschnider” points up another reason that
Trockel’s work is puzzling. Not only is there a language barrier for
those who don’t read German, but beyond that, her work is so full of
specific references to German history and culture that, in certain
significant ways, it must remain opaque to Americans. Of course,
this might be said about any encounter between a viewer and a
foreign work of art; but it’s particularly relevant to Trockel’s work,
in that she addresses the issue directly in her two photographic
pieces.

Each of these is divided in half, the right side showing a generic
American image taken from the media: in one, it’s an inner-city
scene of children playing in the spray of an open fire hydrant; the
other depicts a small, perfect suburban house. The pane of glass that
covers the left half of each piece is coated with a wash of white
paint. Thus, Trockel subtly satirizes a German’s vision of America, a
perception that sees stereotypes while remaining ignorant of the real
complexities that are, in effect, invisible, as though hidden behind a
storefront’s whitewashed windows. It’s a wonderfully economical
metaphor about how people misperceive foreign cultures, about the
all-too-human tendency to substitute simple, sometimes idealizing
but usually prejudicial fantasies for awareness of the less easily
accessible depths of the Other.

Taken in reverse, these photographic works also reflect how
Trockel herself, as a foreign artist, has been misperceived by Ameri-
cans. She was, at first, “the knit person,” and the true formal range
and conceptual depth of her art was unseen. Now the extraordinari-
ly protean nature of her imagination has begun to be revealed; yet
there is still that realm of uncertainty—the shadow side—that gives
her work, no matter what shape it takes, its enchanting poetic
resonance.