

Art In America, June 1991

Piper has been able to sustain a dialogue with her themes over many years. Like the earlier works, *Compote with Oranges* (1990) presents a composition of forms that can be readily and comfortably named—vase, orange, bouquet, bowl—but that reveal within their very shapes a life that belongs to and is sustained by the painted field within which these images exist.

—Walter Thompson

BOSTON

Judy Haberl at Akin Gallery

Judy Haberl's recent show displayed this talented sculptor's gifts in a new and stronger manner. Her previous work has been energetically theatrical: she has created three-dimensional "backdrops" that flow out onto the floor and exhibited strange cabinets with perplexing recesses and protrusions. Such works confirmed her deep intuition for the affinities and instabilities of different materials. Perhaps at times Haberl's "backdrops" included too much, consequently losing the focus that might have been provided by an accompanying performance or event; at least, so it occasionally seemed to this reviewer.

In this show, titled "La Belle Epoque," Haberl forged a collection of mysterious objects that realized her striking vision without trying to make a seamless tapestry of the different components. Each piece has a strength that keeps it from requiring any conceptual buttressing through references to accompanying works; at the same time the ensemble has a coherence and unity of intention.

Certainly each piece is quite different from the next. Her materials include ink, steel, plaster, cork, key chains, rub-on graphics, concrete, Styrofoam, copper, acrylic, cord, brass, a milk crate, graphite, aluminum, straw and iron (I may have missed a few). The colors, surfaces and sculptural particulars are as varied as the materials, and the fine details are as complex as the basic forms are simple. Most of the works are circular. In an abutment adjoining the main gallery, for example, was a dazzlingly colored floor arrangement made up of nine variously sized oriental umbrellas, all open and with their handles cut off.

Haberl's works refuse referentiality, and with a few exceptions (the shapes of chessmen and a number of barely identifiable press-on letters and symbols), overt representational traces have been effaced. In several pieces, including two columnar ones, a stablike, thickened wing motif is repetitively employed. These wings are encrusted so that they also resemble hands or even leaf clusters. This overlay of possible references produces a very strong effect.

The unforced connections between the different pieces effectively stymied any attempt to discern a common theme or to regard the work in serial fashion. The exhibition called to mind the "iceberg" theory of art first formulated by Ernest Hemingway: as long as the artist is fully aware of what is left out, the 90 percent of the work "under the surface" will resonate in the portion that is visible more strongly than if it were actually there. In any case, there's nothing missing in any way from Haberl's fine pieces. The assurance of her work added a delightful charge and glow to this assembly. —Thomas Frick

CHICAGO

Adam Brooks at Abel Joseph

"Zimne Pivo," "Cerveza Fria," "Cold Beer"—in an early piece by Adam Brooks, these synonymous phrases in Polish, Spanish and English, from the neighborhood tavern signs ubiquitous in the artist's part of town, are press-typed onto small pieces of scrap metal. They point to his interest in the uncomprehended word, approached not as a semiotic exercise but as a given of human interaction.

Abel Joseph Gallery is perhaps the perfect venue for Brooks's work. It is located in the center of a neighborhood whose predominant population has shifted from Polish to Mexican to the upwardly mobile mix that traditionally follows an influx of artists looking for inexpensive housing. Tracing this transformation by implicit reference to shop-window signs and overheard conversations, Brooks invites us simultaneously to engage in clever multilingual word games and to consider the ambiguity inherent in what we accept as the most natural form of communication.



Jane Piper: *Roumanian Blouse*, 1981–82, oil on canvas, 44 by 40 inches; at the N.Y. Studio School. Courtesy Phillips Collection.

A window display overlooking a busy bus stop was commandeered by the artist during the course of the exhibition, and it led some observers to assume the gallery to be a trendy housewares store. Neat rows of glassware bore sandblasted mottoes: 12 tumblers were labeled "trinket," in English as well as more exotic tongues such as Swahili, Gaelic and Esperanto. Three-letter acronyms on martini glasses spanned the spectrum of human experience, from SEC and DMZ to BYO and SOB. Perhaps most disturbing was the set of carafes turned into specimen jars and labeled with verbs like "ejaculate," "defecate" and "menstruate."

This work is intentionally cryptic. As if transported to a land where the dominant language is "foreign," the viewer was forced to guess at the meaning of the most mundane bits of phraseology. Liquid-soap dispensers arranged in a line were filled with a variety of substances, each identified by a four-letter code. A floating dollar bill gave us the clue to "CURR," and it was not difficult to make sense of the thick white glue of "ADHE" or the flat beer of "INEB," but the significance of "AMBR," "DEPR" and "CATH" remained more pointedly elusive.

The most convoluted piece in the show was titled *Crit*. Brooks here culled from 50 years of art magazines a list of words that

were new to him, then edited them down to an evocative group of five, significantly including "aphasic" and "syncretic," terms that have to do respectively with the failure and multiplicity of meaning and interpretation. Each of the words was presented twice—once in sandblasted block letters on glass, then again in a computer-generated voice print. The two representations were displayed together in dime-store document frames and their sources cited in parodic scholarly detail.

Rather than bemoan the ultimate failure of direct communication, however, Brooks persuades us to explore and accept it. His aim seems to be to expand our awareness, not deaden it. A sign in the gallery window was written in Esperanto, a language that, while invented to foster universal understanding, remains unintelligible to virtually everyone. Translated, it read, "The poverty of language, the insufficiency of words." —Michael F. Bulka

ATLANTA

Todd Murphy at Lowe

Every one of the more than 40 works in this show is gorgeous. The suites of charcoals and of photocollages and the single drawings on torn paper or rags are fine, but they were over-

held by the six monumental paintings at the heart of the show. These are physically large and technically complicated, involving layers of manipulated materials: tar on canvas, then black-and-white photographs, charcoal and graphite, Rhoplex and ruddy brown pigment lushly and weepingly painted. The effect is ensuously subtle, like the aging-arnish glow of Rembrandt's portraits. Some are finally faced with Plexiglas, bolted to the picture plane with hefty iron brackets.

The intricate surface treatment suits Murphy's curious and moody subjects. Nearly all of the pictures—in whatever medium—incorporate the image of one or more of the four antique dressmaker's forms that were displayed in the gallery. With their iron pedestal bases and jointed arcs, these musty, headless and macabre objects exude a silent power that is strengthened by the tender way Murphy dresses them. A corsage of dried roses is pinned to one's breast; another wears a short skirt of purple static and faded pink, yellow and red roses attached with dull-silver duct tape. A third dress-form wears a ball gown made of a tarp and torn white paper, while the fourth is dressed in a ballet skirt of dusky, brick-colored paint tags.

A version of this last skirt turns up in a haunting black-and-white photograph in which a woman wearing only the skirt is posed asegas's famous young ballerina. The photo is very dark—almost as though the glass were smoked—and Murphy deliberately uses split and broken frames and bits of glass along with old matting to set off the jewel-freshness of the model. This photo, enlarged and re-worked, appears again in Mur-

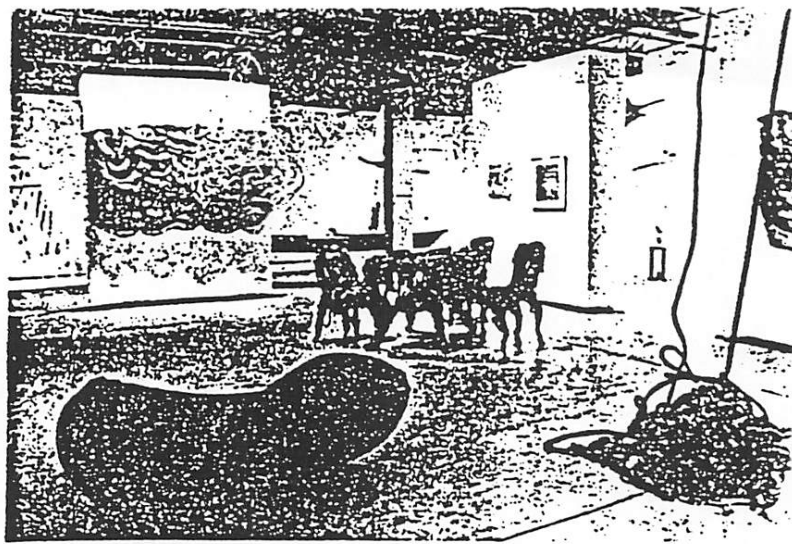
phy's largest painting, *Prima Vera* (11 by 15 feet). Collaged onto the right side of the canvas, beneath a sheet of painted Plexiglas, the photographed woman keeps patient company with a double portrait of the rag-skirted mannequin on the left side. Between them hang four bundles of dead flowers, accessible to the viewer through a hinged flap in the Plexiglas. The word "POLIPHONIS," stenciled in red paint across the picture's lower edge, looks as though it should mean something important, but it's a made-up word that means nothing at all. (Murphy seems to employ nonsense words as a tease and a visual anchor; the works are probably better off without this quirky pretension.)

The painting is encased in a baroque frame assembled from various lengths of ready-made molding. The four sides don't match, the corners don't miter and only a handful of cherubs and a lone antler embellish the perimeter. Like the fake words, it's eye-catching, but it ultimately drops away from the viewer's consciousness next to Murphy's reverent, smoldering brushstrokes and morbidly beautiful imagery. —Amy Jinkner-Lloyd

NEW ORLEANS

Robert Cary Tannen at the Contemporary Arts Center

For its inaugural exhibition, the extensively renovated Contemporary Arts Center organized a sprawling overview of the work of a favorite son, the architect, city planner, sculptor and New Orleans businessman Robert Tannen. In the Lupin Foundation gallery space on the second floor,



Robert Cary Tannen: Installation view of exhibition, 1990; at the Contemporary Arts Center.

260 running feet of aerial photos of the Mississippi River, here altered to reflect Tannen's proposal that the river be made a national park, formed an outer circle surrounding an array of ceramics, found objects, sculptures of marlins, wire-wrapped wrenches, driftwood, canoes filled with trash and beer cans, replicas in galvanized steel of the "shotgun" style of house indigenous to the region, architectural plans, inner tubes, a money tree, various clothes, toys and Gulf Coast memorabilia spray-painted orange (Tannen's "Agent Orange" series) and drawings of van Gogh's shoes—among other objects. Close to the center of the room was an update of Tannen's 1989 "Odalisque" exhibition, originally installed at the local Res Nova Gallery: two linked grand pianos endowed with recording capability that throughout the show's run played pieces by local musicians.

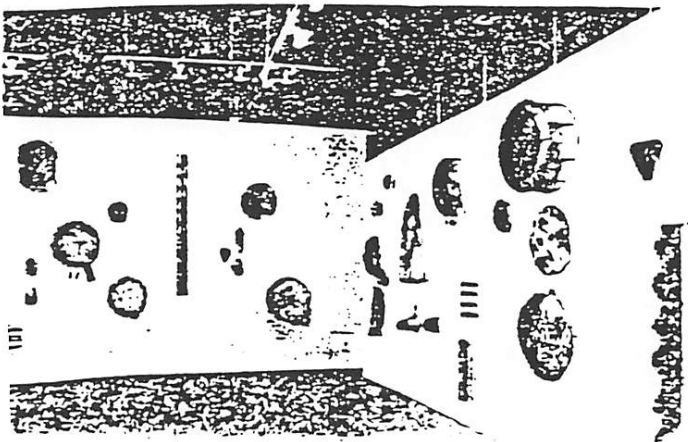
Despite the best intentions on all sides, however, this "RE-PROspective" (as the show was titled) ended by falling into the contradiction implicit in all such surveys of living artists: it is impossible to impose definitive form on the work of an artist who is still evolving—a difficulty heightened in this case by the fact that Tannen's art is itself largely about change. What is best in the work of this Gulf Coast Conceptual artist—his ecological concern with the larger bio-region, his playful "misuse" of ordinary objects or his transformation of bric-a-brac (as in his enigmatic "Personal Affects" series), and his strong emphasis on ephemerality—is almost *designed* to resist encapsu-

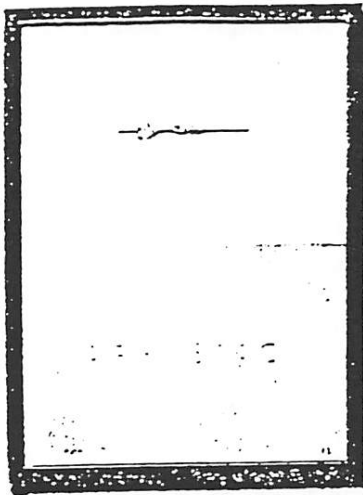
lation or summary treatment.

The free-floating and provisional nature of Tannen's enterprise was captured in a video documentary on the artist by Jean Tarduy, which was included in the show. Meanwhile, of all the varying, usually weighty, considerations of Tannen's work collected in the accompanying catalogue (ranging from essays by Mark di Suvero and Peter Halley to commentary by two of Tannen's children), the view that most hits home is Adolfo Nodel's, which places Tannen's (realized) design for the New Orleans Mississippi Bridge and his involvement with the riverfront and Warehouse district developments in the civically concerned "post-avant-garde" or post-esthetic artist—in other words, a lighter, Southern counterpart to, for example, Krzysztof Wodiczko or Newton and Helen Harrison.

Overall, however, this "RE-PROspective" strained too much to enshrine Tannen in the pantheon of world-renowned Conceptual artists. In Tarduy's video, CAC curator Lew Thomas compares Tannen's oeuvre to that of Bruce Nauman and Joseph Beuys. Peter Halley tries to bring out the critical and political implications of Tannen's work. It doesn't do Tannen any injustice to recognize that his work of the past few decades lacks the structural complexities of Nauman's experiments, as well as the seriousness, the multileveled, often politicized semantics and shamanistic thrust of Beuys's undertaking. Even when commenting directly on the art market, as in *Caribbean Painting*—a wall of gold-painted cinder blocks—Tannen's work is more about the medium than the message, and it

Judy Habert: Installation view of exhibition *La Belle Epoque*, 1990; at Akin Gallery.





Adam Brooks: *Crit* (detail), 1991, mixed mediums, one of five images, 14 by 11 inches each; at Abel Joseph. (Review on p. 154.)

falls unabashedly short of any substantive criticism of political and social realities. Tannen's intention has always been to displace, alter or rearrange material rather than to dissect its meaning and built-in assumptions. Reveling in the sheer exuberance of play, this is art that not only deflates hyperbole but makes it irrelevant.

—Jay Murphy

LOS ANGELES

James Hayward at Ace

In the mid-80s, painter James Hayward gave up making the taut-surfaced, monochromatic canvases for which he was then known in favor of a freewheeling approach that now seems completely resolved. Using a mixture of oil paint and wax, he has produced lush, single-color panels inscribed with diagonal and circular strokes which curl across the surface in swaths and tendrils of evident abandon.

The eight-room exhibition at Ace was titled "Pure-Odd." All of the works consist of an odd number of canvases regularly spaced, and each panel is painted in a pure, unmixed color. *Homage to the Muse—La Petite Vestal Version* is composed of 15 "endangered" colors of paint, pigments which may soon be outlawed as hazardous to health. The hues are shockingly brilliant, their opaque luminescence intensified by Hayward's use of black

gesso beneath the thick paint. The panels are evenly arranged in three horizontal rows of five. Rather than relying on theory or system, the placement of colored panels is completely intuitive, so that there's no discernible intellectual rhythm. The width of the brush stroke varies slightly from canvas to canvas. One panel is a cracked and arid bright yellow; another, an oozing crimson. Hayward's choice of colors, here and elsewhere, can be offbeat, as with his apple green and orange-peel cadmiums. Such sweet and distasteful colors prove, in combination with others, unpredictably palatable.

Two of the four 15-panel paintings shown here were accompanied by three-panel vertical works Hayward calls "GAWAs" (guardian angels of Wa—Wa being a kind of Buddhist spirit of creation). The dark and silent *GAWA #5*, with its deep green, black and deadened brown panels, guards *La Petite Vestal Version*. *GAWA #4* is installed alongside the larger *Homage to the Muse—Vernal Version*. As its titular reference to spring might suggest, this work is characterized by bright colors which produce a fast-paced optical beat, while *Autumnal Version*, in another room, is more earthy and sedate.

Alluding to Ad Reinhardt's final commitment to the trisected square, *Ad Awed* is composed of nine vertical panels which form

an overall rectangle nearly 12 feet high. Reinhardt's notion of purity—the antiexpressive, subtly valued black—couldn't be more different from Hayward's exultant gesture, which delights in greens, purples, oranges and reds straight from the paint can. This is a looming, disconcerting painting, and like many, seems blatantly opposed to the decorative. Occupying 47 feet of a long wall, for instance, is *Suite in Five Pieces #9*. From left to right, the huge canvases are ruddy brown, dried-blood crimson, green, rosy purple and dark blue. The deep green is worked into thick, globular eruptions. The sheer amount of paint used is overwhelming.

My own preference is for the more intimate paintings, such as *GAWA #1*, which has a very human presence. The panels are purple, cadmium green and milky brown. The strokes are luscious and creamy, especially in the brown panel at bottom, where sinuous peaks of paint are pulled enticingly from the surface. Hayward's work is more sensuous and evocative than ever. It was commandingly installed and has never looked better.

—Frances Colpitt

PARIS

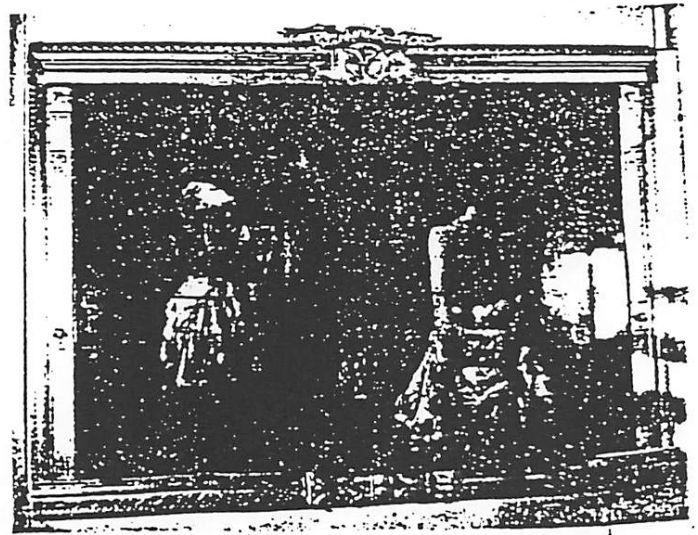
Denis Roche at Adrien Maeght

In the radicalization that so many French intellectuals experienced in the 1960s, the writing of Denis Roche, a prominent French poet, was subjected to ever-greater pressures, and by the early '70s he seemed to be aiming at a thor-

ough destruction of the very notions "poetry" and "literature." It is likely that Roche's sense of having carried this poetic deconstruction as far as possible was one thing that led him, beginning in 1976, to incorporate photography into his work. What began with the inclusion of some snapshots in one book has since grown into a serious undertaking, here honored with an exhibition at a prestigious gallery and a sumptuous catalogue. Given these circumstances, one must try to evaluate Roche as a photographer rather than as a writer indulging his hobby.

Initially these photographs make that difficult, because they abound in deliberate signs of amateurishness. Like many a Sunday photographer, Roche is obsessed with the possibilities of the automatic timer, and a number of images depict him and his wife caught with the aid of delayed shutter release. Roche's "unprofessional" status is further emphasized by the vacation settings of most of the pictures: Egypt, Mexico, Guatemala, Morocco, Italy. We are shown pyramids, temples, beaches, outdoor cafés and lots of hotel rooms. The weather is usually warm (the woman is generally in a summer dress, Roche himself in loose-fitting, casual apparel), and the dates Roche carefully provides often read *Juillet* and *Août*. These photographs not only invoke the genre of the tourist snapshot, they belong to it.

However, as the precise dates suggest, Roche is more concerned with the metaphysics of time than the average tourist. In



Todd Murphy: *Prima Vera*, 1991, mixed mediums, 132 by 180 by 11 inches; at Lowe. (Review on p. 154.)