

REVIEWS

degree that of a history that has been almost amnesia, it is the tension between the anxiety of influence and the attempts to evade it. The elegant sprawl of Anaxani's mark-making, his rhythms of accumulation and dispersal, the abrupt alterations between linearity and play, inevitably recall Cy Twombly, but beyond that the "Abandoned Paintings" are darkened by the murmur of innumerable paintings, by "semantic memories of paintings" (as Harold Rosenberg once put it) that no amount of subtraction or surveillance can suppress.

While Anaxani has mitigated the impact of sightliness in the process of making these works, he has not failed to "make the visible a little hard to see," as Wallace Stevens put it, by literally darkening the paintings to near colorlessness. Encrusted in diverse blacks (oil and graphite), they are legible as much through texture as through their slight differences of shade, with the reflectiveness of graphite coating the surface to functional whiteness. And then by hanging the five paintings contiguously, as though they comprised a single work in five panels, Anaxani has deliberately amplified their cumulative impact at the expense of their considerable individual nuances, which viewers must work hard to excavate from the offhand summariness of these works.

—Harry Schwabsky

ALAN BELCHER
JACK SHAINMAN
GALLERY

Although Alan Belcher's work has been visible for more than a decade, it has never attracted a broad audience. Part of this has to do with the critical discourse that surrounded photography during the '80s, with its limiting, even formalist emphasis on the rather banal notion that the photograph was a mediated image not a window on reality. But some of the blame must also be laid at Belcher's feet: he has tended to overstate the degree to which a single piece or series can effectively engage both sculptural and photographic issues. Not only have his efforts in this direction often resulted in a certain formal clunkiness, but when he resorts to merely juxtaposing the image of the object with the thing itself, they degenerate into nothing more than clever witticisms on problems of representation. As a rule, Belcher walks a fine line—even in his best pieces, he seldom transcends clever punning to achieve semantic complexity.

In his recent exhibition, however, Belcher seems to have shifted away from photography toward a greater emphasis on object-making. Described by one critic as



Alan Belcher, *Untitled Self-Portrait*, 2004, mixed media, 12 1/2 x 27"



Ann Messner, *Coat*, 1994, mixed media, 2000 (iron, cast iron, 30 x 48 x 27")



Barbara Jones, *Black Jack*, 1990, mixed media, 66 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 20 1/2" (steel, "Bunnies")

"New Age kachina-doll voodoo," his figures were pierced, adorned, encrusted, and/or stained, with matches, needles, and pins, as well as crystals, coins, and garlic cloves. These new works suggest that Belcher is no longer committed to careful visual punning and is ready to cross over into the world of real people and their banalised things. While it is true that the immediate impact of this new work comes from the eagerness with which it embraces themes of abjection and mortification, Belcher has upped the stakes of these as constant metaphors by setting to school his own body to suppurational lesions. Displayed like ethnographic relics, the nearly two dozen "beats" dolls all incorporated not only Belcher's photographic self-portrait, but also his blood, hair, nail clippings, and fabric taken from his own clothes.

At the level of process, these pieces suggest much of Belcher's early work by offering the paradoxical notion of a spectacle of immacy, an intimacy that stems from their evocation of countless hours of obsessive labor. These works not only effect a remarkable interweaving of the sculptural and the photographic, but also playfully reveal at the sanctity with which hours of obscurity are usually broached in contemporary art. By literally transforming his photographic self-image into a ritualized fetish-doll, Belcher manages to brighten the resulting object's desirability, while coming close to implying that the whole process of "deconstructing" the photographic is often nothing more than a lot of muscle-punches. In the end, these beacons of the quiet world achieve what Belcher's work has too often only hinted at: the creation of a powerful, even charismatic, object that captures the spectator in its orbit, effectively upping the ante on his long-standing meditation on the photographic.

—Dan Cameron

ANN MESSNER
BILL MAYNES
CONTEMPORARY ART

Though Ann Messner's previous work—everyday, no-longer-functional objects and appliances, embedded in wax or wrapped in lead—may have communicated the purpose of the commodity become relic, it seemed cut off from the complexities of subjective expression. The artist's recent exhibition at this small SoHo venue, marked an abrupt shift in her approach both to materials and to the mechanics of display. No longer placidly extending the tradition of the ready-made, Messner, in her most recent show, employed a wide range of media to create a mysterious, moving tableau.

The central and most arresting work in the show, *Coat* (all works 1994) consisted of a violet wool cloak lined in red velvet, suspended from the ceiling alongside a painted hood with holes cut out for the eyes. Numerous red ribbons cascaded from the hood to the floor, shimmering off in various directions. A cast-iron megaphone stood on the other side, as if it had occupied that spot for a century. On the facing wall hung a work whose prosaic title, *Photo, Foreplay, Light & Belly* belied the odd points of connection between the four elements. A small framed photo smeared with red wax was backed by color in a single-dial red bulb, which was suspended between a pair of rusty tongs and a low-hanging impression in iron of a pregnant belly. Messner wants us to see these sequences as deliberate, but her underlying purpose is cloaked in secrecy.

The key to understanding this finely tuned ensemble seems to lie with the third piece in the show entitled *Mother*: a cartoonish baby bottle resting lifelessly on a small protruding shelf. This piece ex-

presses volumes about the mixed emotions with which the artist confronts motherhood. *Mother* generates an aura of free-floating sadness that seems connected to that moment when it is no longer necessary to nurture, but the desire to do so remains. Having finally unleashed the emotions that have always been a hidden force in her art, it is hard to imagine that Messner would ever want to put the lid back on them again.

—DC

"BUNNIES"
NOLAN/ECKMAN

Bunnies—unlike the "death of painting," the "return of abstraction," or the "return to figuration"—are rarely the conceptual framework for a group show. *Bunnies* are thought to be cute, lovable, cuddly; even the word, which rhymes with "funny" and "sunny," connotes something infinitely friendly, happy, goody, than art, which almost never aspires to cuteness and only infrequently allows itself to be touched, let alone cuddled. In "*Bunnies*," the apparent incompatibility between this fuzzy creature and the work of art is embodied by Dieter Roth's *Rabbit*, 1973, which insinuates that even this is a fitter subject for art than cuteness: few people would find Roth's sculpture of a rabbit cute, precisely because it's formed of such artistically acceptable materials as straw and the creature's own pellets. And though it's encased in a vitrine, prohibiting viewers from touching what they may not want to touch anyway, you can't help wondering if the artist molded it by hand.

Most of the works in "*Bunnies*" veer toward the anthropomorphic. Peter Saul's cartoonish *Jesus Was A Girl Like Me*,

Alan Belcher

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

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In his recent exhibition, however, Belcher seems to have shifted away from photography toward a greater emphasis on object-making. Described by one critic as “New Age kachina-doll voodoo,” his figures were pierced, adorned, encrusted, and/or stained, with matches, needles, and pins, as well as crystals, coins, and garlic cloves. These new works suggest that Belcher is no longer committed to rarefied visual punning and is ready to cross over into the world of real people and their fetishized things. While it is true that the immediate impact of this new work comes from the eagerness with which it embraces themes of abjection and mortification, Belcher has upped the stakes of these au courant thematics by seeming to submit his own body to supernatural forces. Displayed like ethnographic relics, the nearly two dozen “fetish” dolls all incorporated not only Belcher’s photographic self-portrait, but also his blood, hair, nail clippings, and fabric taken from his own clothes.

At the level of process, these pieces surpass much of Belcher’s early work by offering the paradoxical notion of a spectacle of intimacy, an intimacy that stems from their evocation of countless hours of obsessive labor. These works not only effect a remarkable interweaving of the sculptural and the photographic, but also playfully tweak at the sanctity with which issues of ethnicity are usually broached in contemporary art. By literally transforming his photographic self-image into a ritualized fetish-doll, Belcher manages to heighten the resulting object’s desirability, while coming close to implying that the whole process of “deconstructing” the photographic is often nothing more than a lot of mumbo-jumbo. In the end, these beacons of the spirit world achieve what Belcher’s work has too often only hinted at: the creation of a powerful, even charismatic, object that captures the spectator in its orbit, effectively upping the ante on his longstanding meditation on the photographic.

—Dan Cameron