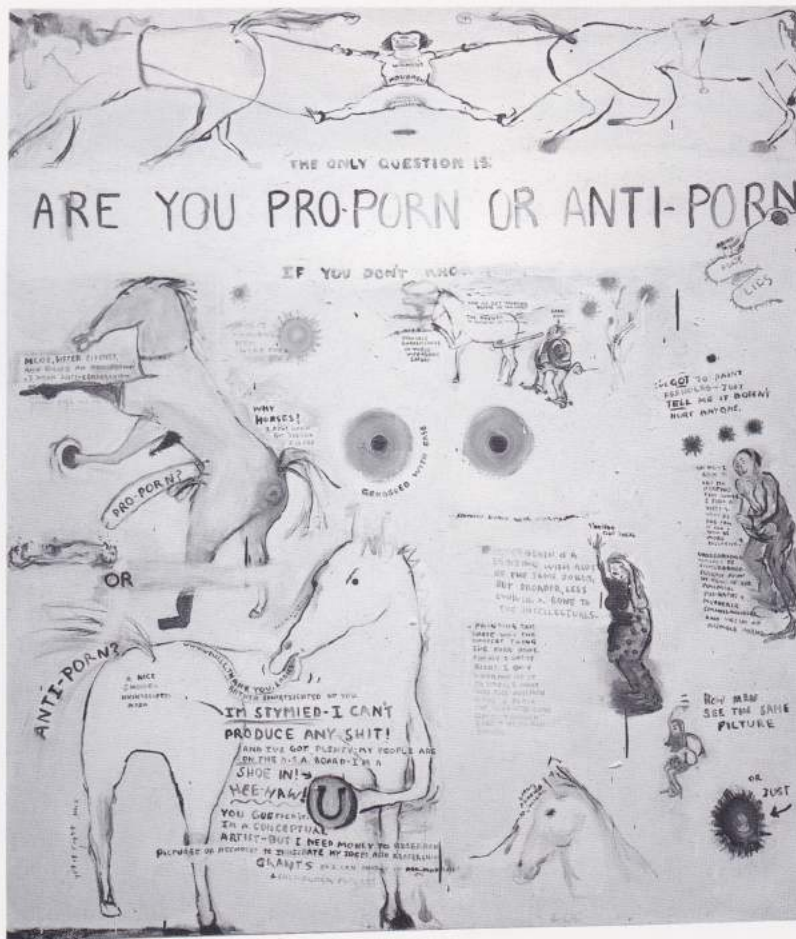


The background of the cover is a deep red color with a fine, woven texture. Overlaid on this are several large, dark, almost black geometric shapes that create a sense of depth and movement. These shapes include a large triangle in the upper right, a long, thin diagonal strip crossing the middle, and several other angular forms in the lower half, some appearing as if they are receding into the distance. The overall effect is abstract and dynamic.

1993 Biennial Exhibition

No Man's Land: At the Threshold of a Millennium

Lisa Phillips



Sue Williams, *Are You Pro-Porn or Anti-Porn?*, 1992

The eighties are over and it is startling to see how some would sweep the decade under the rug, to excise it from history altogether, and along with it, most of the art of the time. Although the period was fertile and produced much good, significant, and enduring art, eighties bashing has been a fashionable critical sport. Yet when certain reactionary critics talk about the greed, excess, celebrity-mongering, and strategy plotting of the decade, of its superficial style and trendiness, they never examine their own relationship to power or their role in creating and perpetuating this particular stereotype. With all the ballyhooing, tirades, moral crusading, and silly potshots, the amount of ink spilled on such supposed banality was enormous. All of this amounted to BIG PUBLICITY; it simply fed the furor, made advocates more vocal, and the public extremely curious. Contemporary art thrives on controversy. Might such critics not have allotted more space to artists they felt had "higher pursuits or intellectual standards" so as to suggest a credible alternative? Very slight chance. In the end, not enough serious attention was paid to the *art*, as the sociology of the art world became an obsession and dominated the discourse.

Now a new cry has arisen: the dictates of the market are said to have been replaced by those of the political arena. PC art is said to be today's fashion. Trends do not always amount to fashion, but there is a propensity in America, once a trend is spotted, to run with it like mad, to package the *Zeitgeist*, excluding a lot of other valid endeavors. This runaway train is set loose by the combined forces of cap-

ital, critical and curatorial investment, and public response. It is extremely difficult at times to discern art that issues from a genuine impulse when it has already been capitalized into a TREND. But it is also too easy to dismiss it all without careful consideration. The challenge—the necessary challenge—is to ferret out the genuine and significant.

At any one moment, there are certain concerns that artists share, and the Biennial has traditionally sought to identify them. Today everybody's talking about gender, identity, and power the way they talked about the grid in the late sixties and early seventies. The issues of context and presentation are paramount and formal invention has taken a backseat to the interpretive function of art and the priorities of content.

One of the most powerful developments among artists in this emerging generation is a deliberate rejection of both an authorial voice and form—of all the emblems of successful art: originality, integrity of materials, coherence of form. Much of the work is handmade, deliberately crude, tawdry, casual, and lacks finish. It is often presented provisionally, as works pinned directly to the wall, or in seemingly noncomposed or nonchalant accumulations of matter, in the tradition of late sixties and early seventies scatter and installation art. Drawing has come to play a central role and is the primary activity for many of the artists here. Appropriation, much of it from the lowliest of sources, continues to inform much of this art, as does a heavy presence of words, printed or handwritten or scavenged.

To the high-minded this art might seem defeatist and inept or at best plaintive and posturing. But that is the point. It deliberately renounces success and power in favor of the degraded and dysfunctional, transforming deficiencies into something positive in true Warholian fashion. This new sensibility, which has been the subject of much recent writing, has been variously described as "the aesthetics of failure," "the loser thing," "pathetic aesthetic," and "slacker art."¹ This art's love of the discredited and demeaned, its embrace of failure, displacement, and powerlessness is in part a reaction to the feeling of inadequacy engendered by repressive social structures mirrored in the media.

From Mike Kelley (a progenitor of this non-movement) to Cady Noland, Karen Kilimnik, Jack Pierson, Raymond Pettibon, and Sue Williams, we encounter a wasteland America, a bleak, chaotic, non-site of enervation, anomie, anger, confusion, poverty, frustration, and abjection: a dead zone, a no-man's-land. The art is infused with meaning that reflects the disaffection of the socially marginalized, subcultural groups within a predominantly white, male, heterosexual society.

Sue Williams wrenches painting away from its white male domain to comment on that society—its dogma and its exclusion of women. "The art world can suck my proverbial dick," screams one piece. Williams' work, which varies from drawing to painting to wall installations that combine the two, is raunchy, gritty, rude, and raw, exposing the humiliation, cruelty, and indifference many women suf-

fer daily. One seamy underside of American life is her subject: the heinous abuse, misogyny, neglect, rape, incest, and violence that permeates many sexual relations and social encounters. *Uncle Bud: fantasies of young girls as directed by some middle aged slob* is an incendiary chronicle, told through image and text, of incest and bulimia. It is also darkly, sarcastically funny. Williams' visual puns do nothing to diminish the horror of her subjects; on the contrary, like gallows humor, they represent a fierce determination to survive.

Williams' work proceeds from personal experience and has a strong autobiographical quality which her stream-of-consciousness drawing style serves to reinforce. The caricatured pornographic

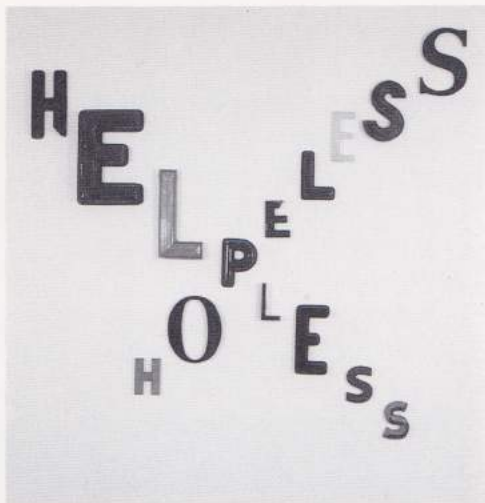


Raymond Pettibon, (untitled), 1987. Ink on paper, 14 x 11. Feature, New York.

images—of the zap comic variety—are all the more unsettling because they are done by a woman with a probing, scathing wit. In *Are You Pro Porn or Anti Porn*, she also uses kitsch sources like ads, illustrations, cartoons, and consumer packaging in order to expose the mutual linkage of victim and victimizer.

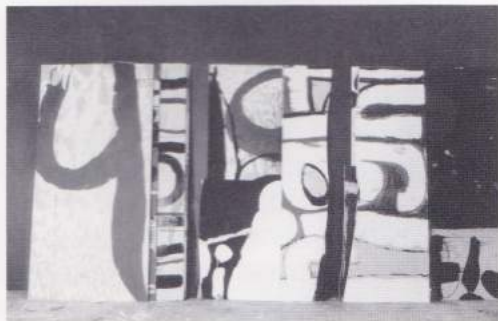
Raymond Pettibon incorporates fragments of literature into his drawings, together with pulp fiction, comic book imagery, commonplace expressions, high art, and religious references—all to form his own personal cosmogony. An obsessive reader and draftsman, Pettibon's crisp, mostly black-and-white drawings present a raw vision of adolescent suffering and desire quite at odds with the supposedly sunny vision of his Southern California home. He often depicts cataclysmic events in nature and culture—mushroom clouds, thunderbolts, big bangs, explosions—or traumatic psychic events, such as the trials of teenage love or the suffering of the artist or political disillusionment. A strong metaphysical strain infuses these works, and though Gumby may be the resident philosopher, Pettibon meditates in a free-floating, free-wheeling manner on spirituality and redemption, the final resting place, and a return to Eden.

Jack Pierson likewise works in a stream-of-consciousness mode, and his art is also diaristic and confessional. Emanating from the (marginalized) perspective of a gay man, it is suffused with emotion; not with anger but with sorrow, dejection, and romantic lament. Pierson uses a variety of materials: artless drawings of awkward, scrawled texts that recall William Weg-

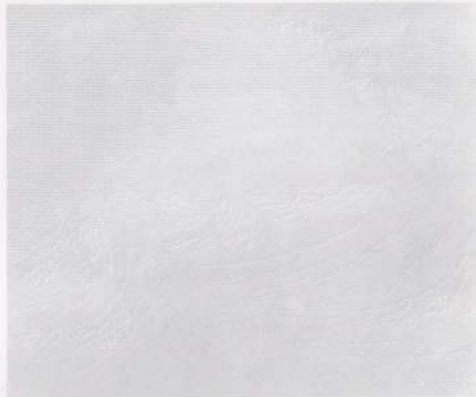


Jack Pierson, *Helpless/Hopeless*, 1991. Plastic letters, dimensions variable. Tom Cugliani Gallery, New York.

man's works on paper; mismatched signs that are scavenged from old restaurants and movie marquees; and over-exposed photographs tacked directly to the wall, most often exhibited together in offhand arrangements. Pierson's hapless world is embodied in signs reading "Someday" or "Nothing," blurry, askew snapshots of stray dogs and back alleys or cheap motel poolsides. They speak of the rootlessness and vagabond nature of a latter-day "beat"



Suzanne McClelland, *Painting*, 1992 (detail of installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York)



Simon Leung, *Marine Lovers*, 1992 (detail)

existence. The existential longing and loneliness of Pierson's non-place precincts have a lyrical *film noir* quality that closely parallels the recent films of Gus Van Zant.

Like Pierson, Suzanne McClelland too has used the word "someday" as the basis for several works. In the context of other phrases—"no," "don't worry," "nothing," and "alright"—"someday" suggests an authoritative voice, a promise held out, a means to placate both fears and desires. The configurations of letters and the way they are painted evoke different emotional registers: the ambiguous state between fear and desire, the dreamy reverie of future possibility, the panic of being restrained, the longing of promise, the anger of refusal and denial. McClelland combines abstract painting with words and writing to fuse the listening experience with seeing. Her gestural painting seems to issue from the scriptural process, the graphic impulse. It is concrete poetry that incorporates different stages of language and utterance. Individual letters of varying sizes stand as discrete forms

and emblems; clustered together they create sounds; and, finally, as the eye roams the space of the painting, words begin to appear. One drifts through the spaces of McClelland's paintings in a state of emotional contingency and flux.

We are again at sea, drifting, in Simon Leung's installation *Marine Lovers*, where nothingness takes on a poignant physical form. Dozens of sheets of paper have been tattooed—imprinted with texts and images created by repeated pinpricks—and placed on clear plexiglass shelves cantilevered from the wall. One can only perceive the words and forms as light filters through the tiny holes or illuminates a slightly raised surface. Leung's obsessive and time-consuming method of representation yields bare perceptibility, emphasizing the border between being and nothingness, form and formlessness, visibility and invisibility.

"In my work," Leung has remarked, "I have tried to prick my way to the limits of inherited ideas of sexuality. What I found was that it led me to the glory hole."² There is a metaphorical interplay between the pinprick and the glory hole, where a sexual transaction occurs that is totally anonymous and disembodied, a site of division and exchange between self and other. The pinprick is the phallus that creates the orifice which defines the prick in its void. Self and other can likewise be seen to have a similar relationship: one is already indebted to the "other" in the constitution of self.

In *Marine Lovers*, Leung uses quotations from tombstones in Macao, passages from current linguistic, psychiatric,

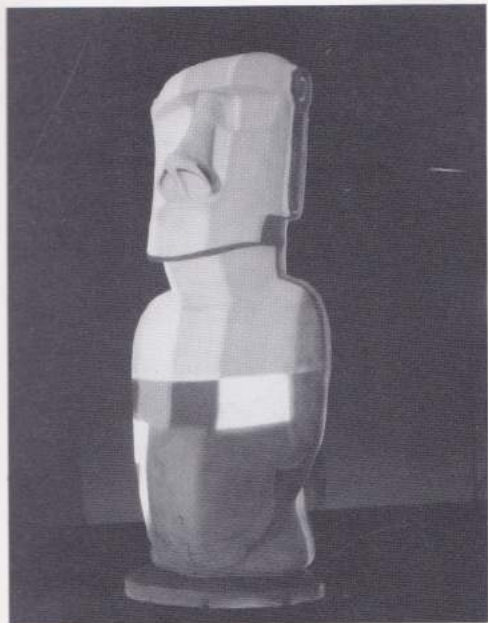
and cultural-philosophical discourse as well as his own writing to further explore his outsider status and intersecting identities as a Chinese-American and gay man. Two symmetrical images of a wave, based on the famous nineteenth-century woodcut by the Japanese master Hokusai, are repeated several times, until they meet in the middle of the installation in an image of a whirlpool.

Explorations of post-colonial subjectivity concern several other artists in the show. Bruce Yonemoto, Norman Yonemoto, and Timothy Martin's video installation about Easter Island examines the Western projection of desire and imagination onto that ancient Polynesian culture. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco's perfor-

mance-installation about the discovery of America analogizes colonialist attitudes toward the indigenous population to the situation outsiders still find themselves in today. Miguel Gandert's photographs of Hispanic culture in New Mexico document various rituals that syncretize native and colonial traditions.



Miguel Gandert, *El Cerro*, 1989



Bruce Yonemoto, Norman Yonemoto, and Timothy Martin, *Land of Projection*, 1992 (detail)

Lari Pittman, who also has a mixed cultural heritage, expresses "otherness" again, not through installation, performance, or photography but through painting. His work doesn't deliver what has traditionally been expected of painting—it is defiant in its lack of heroics, touch, and grand tradition, drawing instead on a strange, riotous palette (which some find embarrassing and ugly) and debased imagery, which he converts into a source of joy and bittersweet, fin-de-siècle celebration. *A Chronology of Resignation and Insistence* accepts early death both as a waste and as a fact in an age of AIDS, but seeks a way to transform that death, that waste, into something beautiful by fetishizing it. Putrefaction and decay



Lari Pittman, *Untitled #2 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1992. Synthetic polymer and enamel on mahogany panel, 82 x 66. Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, and Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York.

have a perfumed aroma, jewels and excrement coexist side by side. Pittman offers a hallucinogenic rollercoaster ride, a whirling vortex of images—candles, steeples, wind-mills, figures, directional signs, rockets, words, numbers—that is orgasmic, ecstatic, and obsessive in its need to fill the void and embellish everything.

Pittman's paintings fetishize the "abject"—the substances of the body that blur the distinction between subject and object. According to Julia Kristeva, "It is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules, the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."³ The abject is celebrated as a threat and as a way to break

through repressive social and symbolic systems.

Donald Moffett, along with others in the exhibition—Leung, Pittman, Pierson, Zoe Leonard, Nan Goldin—belongs to a generation of newly confident, self-identified gay artists who believe that art must make issues of gay and lesbian sexuality overt. Moffett, among others, has reclaimed the derisive term "queer" as a positive, defiant nomenclature, a "self-definition of pride," in the words of Nan Goldin. He enacts a retrospective homosexualizing of history in his *Nom de Guerre* series, writing suggestive, punning captions under a group of found nineteenth-century military portraits: "Poo Poo Platter," "Truffles," "La Treen," "Trigger." Like Leung, Moffett has also been intrigued by the possibilities offered by the subject of the glory hole



Donald Moffett, *Nom de Guerre: Trigger*, 1991, from the series *Gays in the Military*.

and has worked with it in his bowling ball pieces, in his sheet works, and in his new flower works. In the sheet works—a made-up double bed hanging vertically on the wall with a hole stitched in the middle—embroidered texts read “God, God, God,” “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy,” “Miracle,” “Jesus Fucking God,” and “I drain the wound of all I Know.”

For many of the artists here, pictures are a personal guide to finding orientation in life, whether physical, psychological, political, or sexual. The ambiguity of being, anatomy, and sexuality are subjects of Zoe Leonard’s photographs. She shares a calculated low-key intensity with many of the other artists here, as well as a casual touch that is the result of enormous self-control. Though there is a strong pictorial quality to her photographs, they are often dog-eared, coffee-stained, or marred by various other accidents that upset the purity of traditional photoaesthetics. The everyday, ordinary wear and tear and accumulation of lived life are part of the work’s meaning, which is why a pile of hundreds of pictures languish in the middle of her studio floor and are simply pushpinned to the wall for exhibition.

In one series, Leonard photographs models at a Geoffrey Beene fashion show, but from the extraordinary perspective of underneath, looking up their skirts. Intervening into the politics of looking, she asks what the desire of a woman with a camera is and, more specifically, of a gay woman with a camera. In this introduction of a homosexual subtext into a heterosexual scene, the female model is no longer only an objectified subject but also some-



Zoe Leonard, *Frontal View*, *Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, 40 1/2 x 27 1/4. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Photography Committee 92.73.

one with whom the author identifies. One senses the ambiguity of being looked at—the subject’s position of both power and vulnerability. So Leonard merges self-identification and objectification in an interplay of desire and looking. The photographs are moody, grainy, and seductive, yet they have the remoteness and detachment of surveillance pictures, accentuating their voyeuristic quality. Leonard’s work derives its strength from the fact that she does not submit to any totalizing theory about power and representation or to a simple dualism of dominance and oppression. Instead she uses her art to explore areas of ambiguity, outside her activist efforts, where obsession and desire reside.

The well-trodden ground of sexuality and the body, a common concern of so



Matthew Barney, *Drawing Restraint II*, 1988. Video installation. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

many artists in this exhibition, is given a new dimension by Matthew Barney. Barney, whose work has been hotly debated, embraced, and disputed over the past two years, builds on the seventies body art/performance work of such figures as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Chris Burden. Barney has identified the athlete as the archetypal American male hero, and uses him to question the masochism, bonding, complex role playing, and channeling of sexual energy that occurs within the ritual and mythology of sport.

His first New York exhibition was an astonishing *tour de force* (and spectacle) that combined live performance, video, and objects in a spatial installation. In the performance (which was never public), a nude Barney subjected himself to a test of physical endurance, scaling the walls of the gallery with the aid of free-climbing equipment. Within the videotape recording of this fanatic ritual of sport and daring, he wove in gender-bending images of himself in drag—in high heels and evening gown. The objects in the gallery—which are relics of this ritual—refer to sports paraphernalia (a wrestler's mat, weight-

lifting bars, and a football bench), but are transformed through materials, like vase-line and tapioca, giving them an eerie, clinical feeling. Though Barney drew fire for trespassing on territory some felt belonged only to the gay community, no one group can claim the exclusive right to question masculine identity and sexual difference. The violation of boundaries—social, sexual, and formal—is the substance of Barney's art.

Language and the body are dual elements in Maureen Connor's installation *Ensemble for Three Female Voices*. A drapery enclosure (an extension of her earlier fabric sculptures that used clothing forms to see how they give meaning to the body) houses three casts of a larynx and tongue, made of melted and then hardened lipstick. These red, dislocated body parts suggest the death of absent bodies



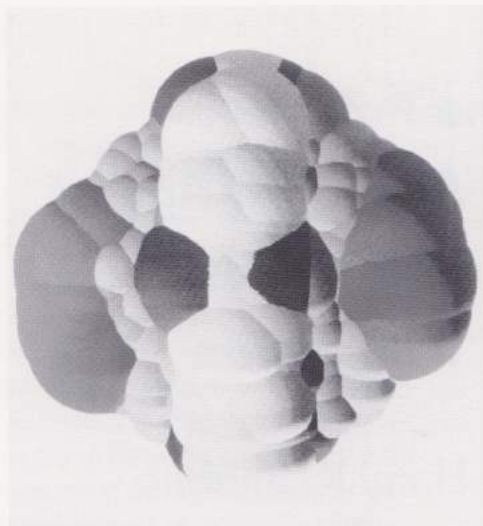
Maureen Connor, *Ensemble for Three Female Voices*, 1991 (detail)

(by accident, murder, or sacrifice?). From each emanates the voice of a woman in a different stage of life: infancy, adulthood, old age. The voices utter not words but preverbal sounds—laughs and cries that form a quasi-narrative about the life cycle, its pains and pleasures, and the relationship of women to each other.

An interest in the preverbal or non-descriptive nature of language is also present in the collaborations of Michael Joaquín Grey and Randolph Huff. Using a super-computer, the team has designed a neural network that simulates the way the brain filters information, producing their own creation myths and life strategies. Their desire to work with such a system, which simulates morphological development, originates in part from the inability of men to give birth. The images are printed from the computer screen through a wax transfer process; the delicate wax image on clear film is then sandwiched between two sheets of plexiglass for presentation on the wall. The result is not purely scientific since the images are subjected to many interventions along the way, but their incredibly beautiful, lyrical sequences suggest a new language and a new frontier.

Grey and Huff describe their serial presentation of forms as similar to *haiku*, that is, embodying condensed meaning instead of pure description. There is an intersection of the biological and technological, the personal and impersonal, as the computer network gives information a behavior and attempts to reproduce and replicate itself.

All the artists in the exhibition reject binary thinking and work to reveal the fic-



Michael Joaquín Grey & Randolph Huff, *Early Development*, 1991 (detail). Wax transfer on mylar, 16 x 11. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

tion of dichotomies. They are probing the complexities of subjectivity—issues of race, class, and sexuality—in terms of multiple discourses and shifting social interactions. From their own life situations, often outside, displaced, or marginalized from the mainstream, they work to overcome both political divisions and entrenched tribalism; they are warriors fighting to expand and enrich the larger culture.

1. This new sensibility was first described by Ralph Rugoff, in *Just Pathetic*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Rosamund Felsen Gallery, 1990); followed by Jack Bankowsky, "Slackers," *Artforum*, 30 (November 1991), pp. 96-100; Jim Lewis, "Bartleby, The Artist," *Art Issues*, no. 23 (May-June 1992), pp. 19-25; and Rhonda Lieberman, "The Loser Thing," *Artforum*, 31 (September 1992), pp. 78-92.

2. Artist's statement describing the installation *Marine Lovers*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 1992.

3. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

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Lives in New York

One-Artist Exhibitions

1991
Stephanie Theodore Gallery, New York

1992
Jason Rubell Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida
Jason Rubell Gallery, special exhibition at 603 Park
Avenue, New York

Group Exhibitions

1984
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, "1984—
A Preview"

1985
Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York,
"Homeless at Home"

1988
Visual Arts Gallery, New York

1989
Minor Injury, Brooklyn, New York, "Homeland:
A Palestinian Quest"
Visual Arts Gallery, New York, "Line"

1990
Wolff Gallery, New York, "To Know a Hawk from
a Handsaw"

1991
Penine Hart Gallery, New York, "Comments on
'Nomos'"
Amy Lipton Gallery, New York, "Breathing Room"
P.S. 1 Museum, The Institute for Contemporary Art,
Long Island City, New York, "New York Diary:
Almost Twenty-Five Different Things"

1992
Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco, "Paintings: Keith
Coventry, David Dupuis, Suzanne McClelland, Carl
Ostendarp, Fred Tomaselli"
Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles, "Drawings"
Jason Rubell Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida, "Off
Balance"
Rubenstein Dianco Gallery, New York, "Contextures
& Constructures"
P.S. 1 Museum, The Institute for Contemporary Art,
Long Island City, New York, "Encounters with
Diversity"
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, "How It Is"

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Painting, 1992 (installation at Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York). Drywall, cardboard, and latex paint. Collection of the artist; courtesy Jason Rubell Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida.