



Back to the Past At Western Union

Haines Gallery show invokes old offices

GALLERIES

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In the past couple of years, the former Western Union building at 49 Geary Street has been honeycombed with galleries relocating from other downtown addresses. Each time a gallery makes new quarters for itself there, I hear talk of what a grotto of pre-computer technology the space was before renovation.

Now the Haines Gallery offers us a taste of Western Union office archeology with "Site = Western Union," a show of artists' installations (through January 4) in a not-yet-gentrified corner of the building's fifth floor, adjacent to the finished gallery.

Most striking among the 10 pieces here are those that respond to the stripped, timeworn office setting, exploiting its redolence of bygone decades.

Wayne Zebzda's "Build to Suit," for instance, is a white slab of freestanding new wall, with a quarter-circle cove of a reception desk attached, that cuts diagonally through a cluster of old office apparatus found on the premises.

The piece produces a poignant time-machine effect as desks, obsolete keyboard consoles and a fluorescent ceiling fixture literally penetrate the wall as though either it or they were not really there now.

In "Killer's Kiss," Chris Komater treats the floor tiles like a game board, placing on them a loose grid of old, dusty men's hats under a single, bare light bulb. Scattered among the hats are lipstick-stained cigaret butts. Wires connect the hats, feeding hidden speakers that give out muffled film-noir dialogue and music.

Evoking the self-images of an earlier generation's sexual politics, "Killer's Kiss" manages to be at once nostalgic, funny and reproachful.

Ray Beldner's "Converse/ Confer/ Conceit" is the real attention-getter here, with its long, eye-level cage full of live homing pigeons. Above the cage, all along a shelf, is a stack of old suitcases. Below it hang dozens of thrift-shop suit jackets, slowly gathering up a disgusting dandruff of pigeon droppings.

Facing this setup are a field of old black telephone receivers on long spiral cords (old Western Union gear?), each hanging on its own chin-high stanchion. Listen in on any receiver and all you hear is a burble of pigeon-coos.

Although I think Beldner's piece picks on too easy a target — the self-importance of the business world, especially of "communications" — it too illustrates well how installation work can draw energy from a setting still shaggy with loose ends of its own history.