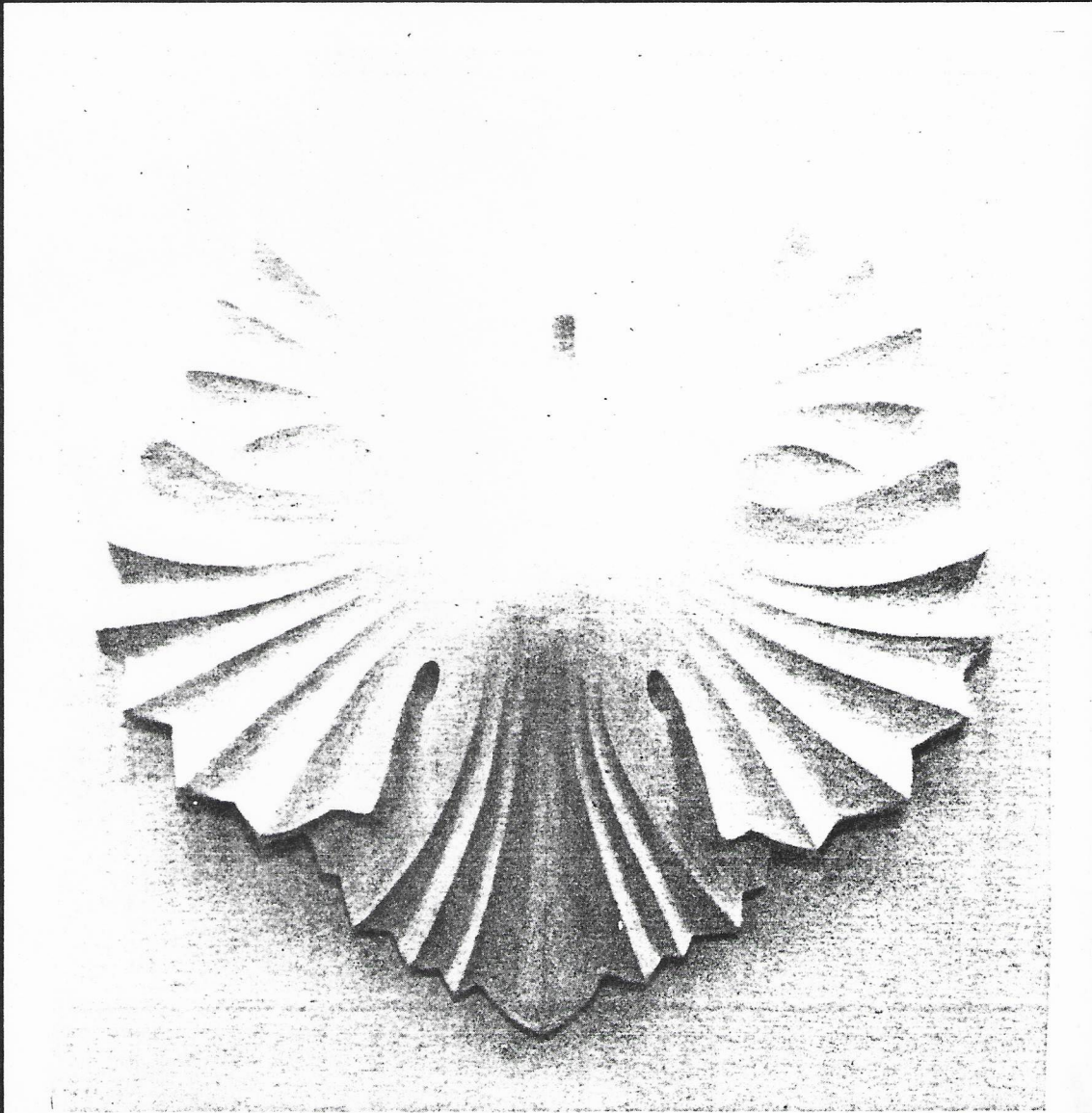


ARTWEEK

February 4, 1989 / Volume 20, Number 5 / \$1.50 per copy



Mark Romano, no title, 1988, stucco/cast hydrocal, ca. 7"x 7", at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.

After Modernism, After AIDS, Against Nature: L.A., p.1
The Texas Triennial's Scattered Sampling: College Station, p.3
Jud Fine's Ongoing Investigations: Santa Clara, p.5

BRAVE AND TROUBLED VOICES

Los Angeles / Judith Spiegel

A provocative and courageous show entitled *Against Nature*, after J. K. Huysman's nineteenth century meditation on exquisitely decadent sensual practices, is currently on view at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). An extensive exhibition of art by gay men about homosexuality, curated by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins, its intent is to examine a particular esthetic: "the ways in which sexual desire informs, distances and empowers the recent history of art made by guys like us." We are invited to enter this environment where, within the self-confessed limitations of the terrain, a variety of voices, beauties and terrors can be found. The sardonic hobnobs with the pathetic, and the beloved is Janus-faced—half



Kevin Wolff, *Man on a Stick*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60", at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.

young man, half death's head.

Although it is increasingly difficult to remember the seventies with any perspective, it seems to have been a decade when everyone was at least potentially gay or lesbian. Did we really do all those drugs, sleep with legions of people from all class backgrounds, races, sexes—and live to tell the tale? Those behaviors described as archetypal of the gay man (promiscuity, engaging in exotic, usually anonymous sexual experimentation) were certainly common practices of the urban, heterosexual society of the time, espoused by the same people who became the moralizing, child-rearing, money-grubbing Yuppies of the eighties. Gay men made oral and anal sex (not to mention SM) all right for straight people—so acceptable that Dr. Ruth could talk about them on television. AIDS changed all that. Even had AIDS never come about, there probably would still have been a backlash against homosexuals, as there has been against women, blacks, lesbians, Jews (perhaps it would have manifested itself as an even more virulent witch-hunt for perceived pederasts). The Reagan Revolution alone would have insured some form of sexual repression, to complement the not-so-tacit permission given to racists and sexists. The genuinely frightening advent of AIDS is legitimizing homophobia.

Given the current political and social climate, *Against Nature* seems more daring—and more shocking—than it would have eight or ten years ago. I was surprised at my own discomfort the first time I walked through the exhibition rooms. Although there was no one piece I found unnervingly graphic, the pervasive display of an esthetic of desire that excluded my concerns as a

woman contributed to my unease. Let's face it—any publicly presented art that speaks to an issue of sexuality would be unsettling in our culture, and the idea of sexual freedom—in connection with the fear of AIDS—takes on the quality of a paradise lost.

The more conservative elements of heterosexual society have always found the serial, predatory and nonprocreative aspects of homosexuality distasteful, it not amoral. At best, a gay man was not too offensive if obviously effeminate or lampooning that most despicable of creatures—a woman—in the form of a queen. What really upset godfearing Republicans were macho men in leather. The gay man as sexual outlaw is a time-honored stance (not always butch), one that writers such as William Burroughs and, lately, Dennis Cooper, like to cultivate. This is the mystique of the Bad Guy forever in search of the next boy body-beautiful. In his catalog-essay short story, Cooper writes about a sexual obsession with the lovely, if hard-to-get Pierre (reality) and the boy prostitute Kenny who dies from AIDS (fantasy). At one time Cooper could enjoy erotic fantasies about sex and impending death; AIDS has ruined that for him. Consummation is likely to remain imaginary—and thus, perfect.

The videotape *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, by Isaac Julien, attempts to reclaim freedom of sexual expression, rendered almost impossible by enormous guilt put upon the gay community. "Feel no guilt in your desire," is intoned and flashed between images of two almost seraphically beautiful young men shot against the background of Venice. The lyricism of the water imagery and repeated sequences of the two men offering flowers to the camera (audience) do little to obviate the funereal undertones.

Tom Kalin's video *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* is intended to be a personal response to the federal government's refusal to fund the dissemination of explicit

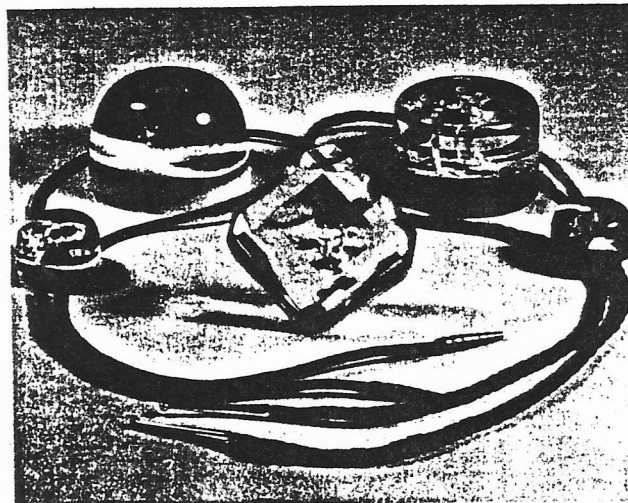


John de Fazio, *Shit for Brains*, 1986, painted ceramic and urethane on wood and linoleum base, at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.

AIDS information to the gay community and I.V. drug users. This highly poetic approach is made up of sequences of found footage, ranging from the famous silent film of two men dancing together to the contemporary *My Beautiful Laundrette*. The result is not agitprop in the strict sense, but the creation of a dream of gay

history. As in *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, Kalin reestablishes a relationship to the erotic, though his ambivalence is more pointed than Julien's.

Of all the excellent tapes in the video portion of *Against Nature*, George Kuchar's *Video Album 5: The Thursday People* seems the least bogged down by artistic or documentarian mannerisms. Its cultivated "artlessness" permits the audience to connect



Bruno Cuomo, *Sleeping Beauty*, 1988, resin with HIV-positive blood and semen, at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.

with the humanity of Kuchar's everyday life. As does Stashu Kybartas's *Danny*, *The Thursday People* takes the dying and death of a person with AIDS as its focal point (Kuchar never mentions the disease by name). Its diaristic form interweaves the death of filmmaker Curt McDowell with Kuchar's ongoing life, including scenes of a dinner party, a film festival, a Greek festival and the filming of a rather riotous sequence à la *King Kong* where a Bigfoot (a man in a really tacky costume) abducts and murders a woman in a white dress. Kuchar's most frequently used technique is to point the camera at a person and chat; the camera never seems to threaten anyone, and if Kuchar is often slyly irreverent toward his friends and colleagues, he is never condescending. McDowell is filmed in his last days, shrunken, bedridden, surrounded by friends and family. Kuchar shows us photographs of McDowell with friends (including a younger Kuchar) from the "good old days" of the seventies. Alone at home, Kuchar repeats the memorial address on McDowell he gave at the film festival; the early images of him as a robust and sensual man contrast starkly with his later deterioration. Kuchar's monolog in the presence of his cat reveals his regrets and his deep sense of loss regarding times past and passing. Surrounding the set piece of the funeral is a celebration—even though Kuchar has been a constant witness, watching McDowell die.

The static component of the exhibition is more diffuse but equally intriguing. Some of the works, however, like Johnny Pichura's feces-colored floor sculpture *Abstract Ass*, are little more than visual one-liners. The punked-out sculptures of John de Fazio have the hallucinogenic power of a debauched R. Crumb. These constructions

are elaborate visual puns done in best East Village cartoon style. De Fazio's work is alluring and repulsive, with the knowing stance of the intentionally incendiary.

Overall, the most realized works deal with the image of the gay male in relation to self-created mythologies and ideas of the erotic. Kevin Wolff's paintings are perhaps the most conventional pieces in the show, but his *Man on a Stick* is a po-

tent inversion of the traditional nude. The subject projects a serenity and awkwardness that is simultaneously modest and obscene. The most complex and thorough deconstruction of the homosexual psyche and cultural stereotyping is found in Doug Ischar's *Household Misappropriation*. This installation consists of large photographs



Mike Glass, detail of installation, 1989, photographs and texts, at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.

of domestic scenes (a man scrubbing a kitchen sink, blowing nose, taking a bath, and so on) with quotations from gay novels, erotica, images from comic-book novellas with gay content and quotes from pre-gay-liberation psychology texts in which homosexuality is discussed as a pathology. Purposely dense and cryptic in presentation, the work reveals the persistence and internalization of cultural stereotypes by the gay-identified man. □