

ART

Review

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Jörg Immendorff drops the Iron Curtain in "The Rake's Progress"

Jörg Immendorff, "The Rake's Progress," Michael Werner Gallery through Jan 18 (see Uptown)

In Jörg Immendorff's current exhibition, a single large canvas—*The Rake's Progress*—dominates an entire side of Michael Werner's elegant, U-shaped space. While the remaining walls are taken up by a dozen or so drawings hung in a narrow line. Part of a larger group of paintings and works on paper, the painting here shares its title not only with William Hogarth's famed engravings of the same name, but a Stravinsky opera for which Immendorff did the set design in a 1994 Salzburg production.

While a modest affair, this show is one of the better efforts I've seen all season. Among other things, it reminded me that Immendorff, like his compatriot Gerhard Richter, is easily worth a museum survey in Gotham, although neither has ever had one. But then, this oversight is consistent with what I've always felt has been too few modern and contemporary German artists in New York museums (notwithstanding the recent "Max Beckmann in Exile" at the Guggenheim Soho).

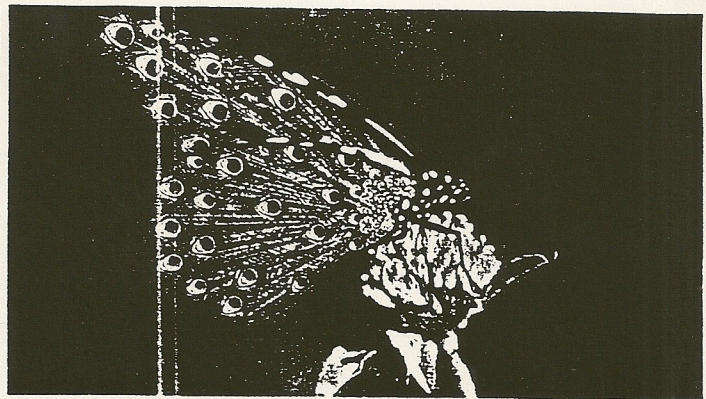
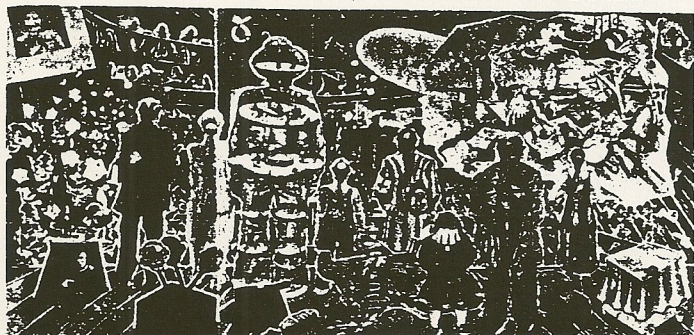
Mostly, this is a result of parochialism. But I suspect what's also involved here is a certain unease with which Americans view the gravity of postwar German art, its struggle with the burden of history. That onus is one from which we Americans have always felt free, but in light of the Holocaust, Germany's artists haven't been so lucky. Indeed, what may secretly disturb us is their historical proximity to an event that exposed the frailty of civilization—precisely because the Holocaust reminds us that any society, no matter how cultivated, is capable of descending into barbarism. And it is that anxiety—hard to face

as it is—which percolates within the work of the best German artists.

History of both the personal and political sort has been at the heart of Immendorff's oeuvre since he began working in the '60s. A disciple of Joseph Beuys, Immendorff mixed a cartoony style with countercultural politics—a blend that didn't always work. In fact (like most Americans, I suppose), I originally found his "Café Deutschland" paintings from the '70s somewhat overbearing. These enormous, allegorical machines cast Germany as a kind of Cold War cabaret, with the artist and his peers as performers or audience members. In effect, Immendorff was picturing his circle as a bunch of existential anti-heroes, trapped within a kind of limbo—the eye of the storm of superpower confrontation (not unlike the Zurich Dadaists riding out World War I). Still, with their amalgam of R. Crumb draftsmanship, private symbolism and Maoist rhetoric, these canvases seemed naive by the time I saw them in the '80s. Glasnost was already in the air, and it appeared that Immendorff would soon be out of subject matter. I've since changed my mind about "Café Deutschland"; maybe seeing Beckmann (an influence on Immendorff) convinced me that the power of allegory could still hold even when the specific events that precipitated it have faded into time. In any case, *The Rake's Progress* shows us where Immendorff went after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It was his involvement with Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* that prompted the artist's interest in Hogarth, and like the 1994 staging of that opera, the painting here is populated by his artist-friends gamboling across a stage. They are portrayed literally as characters in his life story; at the center stands Beuys, marvelously depicted as a museum of contemporary art in the form of a figure-shaped glass tower. Here and there, remnants of Immendorff's past work are scattered like stage props. The upper-right corner of the composition is taken up with Immendorff's rendering of Hogarth's very last work before his death in 1764—a rather misanthropic meditation on mortality titled *Bathos*.

In his memoirs, Hogarth likened his work to representations on stage. It's not surprising, then, that Immendorff found in him a kindred spirit. More to the point, Hogarth provided Immendorff with a new body of work, meant for a world removed from the old drama of East vs. West. —Howard Halle



Mat Collishaw, *Flowers and Butterflies*, 1996.

Mat Collishaw, "Control Freaks"

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, through Sat 11 (see Soho).

For his second solo show in New York, English artist Mat Collishaw exhibits a series of vitrine-like sculptures—some with video projections—which refer to famous experiments with animals. His intention, on the surface at least, is to demolish the notion that nature is a kind of self-sufficient need of culture's rationalization. Instead, he spotlights culture's ruthlessness in dealing with nature. But in both respects, his ideas are way too sketchy.

Slaves to Love—a glass cylinder containing two feathery flamingos on a revolving mirror—refers to an experiment in which flamingos were tricked into changing their mating habits through their own reflection. *When Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* memorializes a 1914 poison-

gas test on rats. In it, an antique table supports a glass globe within which a video image of a lab rat seems to materialize out of a cloud. *My New Kitten* relates not-so-nice perception tests on newborn kittens.

Collishaw refrains from moralizing—which is wise, since his own work has often crossed into the realm of the politically incorrect (like his images of raped or murdered women). Instead, he compares scientific research to art: Both attempt to change perceptions, and both claim a kind of autonomy that sometimes leads to an indifference regarding "real" world concerns—if not outright cruelty.

In the past, Collishaw has managed to shock, but these works lack panache. Top-heavy with information, they are simply too caught up in making references to really cause a stir.

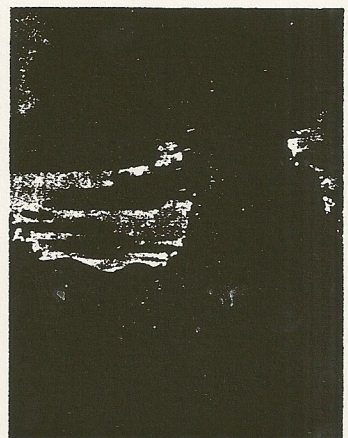
—Martha Schwendener

KK Kozik

Bill Maynes Gallery, through Sun 12 (see Chelsea).

KK Kozik makes paintings that question the realist aesthetic without quite living up to the challenge. Her screwy landscapes and interiors exist in a *Twilight Zone* of probability, but her approach lies too far within the boundaries of conventional modernism to be genuinely disturbing. This is frustrating, since Kozik can handle paint exceptionally well, and has the sensibility of a true absurdist. One wishes, however, that she were as boldly provocative with her medium as she is with her subject matter.

Most of the scenes in her work puzzle the eye and tickle one's perspective. They seem to take place in the hour just before sunrise or just after sunset—a time when the light provides a bewitching, seen-but-not-seen quality. *Found* shows a ramshackle house under a dusky sky, teetering on the precipice of a foliage-wrapped hill. The house is clearly out of scale with the hill, and the fact that the two are at odds creates a darkly comic situation. A stony group of neighbors caught planting a tree on the roof a house they are constructing in *Revolution* gives one equal pause, as the event seems entirely natural, even banal, though it speaks of people recently released from an asylum. *Lost* seems to come straight out of the movie *Wages of Fear*, and is Kozik's most elegant statement. Details of a thick jungle at night peep



KK Kozik, *Found*, 1996.

starkly illuminated from below by the headlights of two trucks chugging along a sinewy path.

What Kozik paints are essentially still-lives on which she has imposed baroque secret histories. But these exist only as contrived fragments lost in time, and their determined hermeticism denies the imagination entrance into the narratives they imply. Instead, one is drawn to the rich patterns and subtle gradations of color in each scene, as well as the skill with which Kozik illuminates shadows that whisper adventure, conspiracy and intrigue. Still, it all adds up to hollow dramas edging toward the surreal in