

Sweet Candyass' Sad-Sack Song

Cary Leibowitz's aesthetic of the pathetic

BY RALPH RUGOFF

BACK IN THE BEGINNING OF THIS CENTURY, artists were heroic figures, an avant-garde leading society out of the cultural wilderness to a better world. Whether outlaw, revolutionary or saint, the artist stood for freedom from the values of commercial culture. As the century draws to a close, however, many artists — including the likes of David

doubt be criticized as being opportunistic, derivative, flippant and empty. At one level, the show undoubtedly is all of those things, but the artist is not stealing ideas from better-known colleagues, such as Kelley and Noland, because he's imaginatively bankrupt. At the heart of this show lies a poignant understanding of how cultural identities — including artistic ones — are pieced together from ready-made sources. As one work proclaims, "The only thing more superficial than me is my art."

Of course, in a TV culture in which the high point of individual expression is the personalized license plate, superficiality is the rule. Americans have little sense of self, and Leibowitz's exhibit, no matter how spurious at times, never loses sight of the unsettling emptiness at the heart of our "I confess" culture. Here bumper stickers, dashboard sunscreens, moving boxes and souvenir baseball bats are emblazoned with frank declarations pertaining to sexuality and personal identity. Most tend toward an expression of self-loathing that takes on the whining tone of a demoralized Pee-wee Herman. A few objects — the crudely lettered sign that reads "Loser line forms here," or the stack of cardboard sunscreens stamped with the plea "Please don't steal my radio, I'm queer!" — provoke outright laughter.

Balancing out the self-deprecating humor is an occasional injection of self-help bathos, revealed here as simply another side of consumer alienation. In a particularly telling piece, two dozen brand-new teddy bears sit on the floor dressed in bright-yellow smocks, all of which declare, "I will make a cubist painting some day, but right now it is not important." Like the kitsch commodity art of Jeff Koons, the piece alludes to the way art has been reduced to the status of collectible, but Leibowitz's work also makes the point that our relation to the self has been similarly demoted. In the society Candyass charts, the self is regarded a bit like a pet, some-

persona scores some hard-hitting points about the politics of narcissism and its corollary, a culture of repression.

In a society obsessed with appearances, issues like racism are treated as cosmetic blemishes or a case of bad breath, a problem to be concealed rather than extirpated. Such endemic hypocrisy is addressed with disarming humor by the show's strongest work, a carpeted rectangle whose cut-out letters goofily announce, "There Are 2 Things I Need to Watch

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4 the Rest of My Life: My Weight and My Racism." Devoid of the easy moral superiority of "politically correct" art, it confronts the viewer with the notion that our ugliest politics may reflect our feelings of personal inadequacy. Victimized by media that promote images of perfection, we look to transfer the sting to other imperfect victims.

Leibowitz's refusal to divorce the politics of self from the sanitized realms of high art and commercial media makes for some amusing moments, especially when sublime cultural icons are abruptly brought down to the level of an adolescent wet dream. In a typically amateurish collage, a photograph of German art guru Joseph Beuys is pasted over a sentimental greeting card that begins, "I'm in love with a man who is gentle and kind . . ." Leibowitz wittily desublimates both Hallmark kitsch and art-world hero worship into a gay love bath.

Leibowitz mocks celebrity worship with a series of glossy 8x10 head shots featuring his own bearded face and accompanied by bumper stickers evoking his homosexuality ("I Stop for Boys," "Wanted: Overnight Meaningful



Cary S Leibowitz's
Dial Now Guys Are Waiting (1990)

Salle, Robert Longo and John Boskovich — would apparently rather be film directors. And why not? It's become increasingly evident that every image in our society, no matter what its origin, ends up looking like an advertisement. Dwarfed by empires of mass-media imagery and the voracious cash flows of the art market, the contemporary artist appears more like an impotent anachronism than anything remotely heroic.

Over the last half-decade, a number of younger artists have reacted, not by moving to Hollywood, but by crawling around in the decrepit end of the art playpen. Working independently and in diverse media, artists such as Mike Kelley, Cady Noland, Georg Herold and Jessica Diamond have created anemic, sad-sack works so lame that they barely function as art. Raising questions about cultural authority, this brand of pathetic art holds up a funhouse mirror to our society's cult of perfection and, in the process, asks us to rethink definitions of failure and success, to question a society composed of "winners" and "losers."

The persona of the artist has never been quite as calculatedly pathetic as in Cary S Leibowitz's sprawling installation at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, the output of a fictitious alter ego named Candyass. Along with pseudo-confessional statements indicting Candyass as a whiny, self-pitying and self-obsessed gay teenager, everything on display is eminently disposable, trashy and trivially sentimental. Candyass' true medium is failure: awkwardly crafted felt banners; ties and pants with embroidered messages ("Kick Me"); bathetic souvenir items and collegiate pennants ("Life sucks," "Misery rules") clutter the gallery, giving it the look of a junior-high-school fair for arts-and-crafts rejects.

Much of it also looks like work by other contemporary artists, and Leibowitz's show will no

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thing to be pampered but at the same time trained and, ultimately, controlled. Emotions — even self-pity — can be experienced through forms already co-opted by the maxims and affirmations reproduced on coffee cups and workplace posters.

BY WORKING THROUGH HIS CANDYASS persona, Leibowitz humorously works his way to the core of issues central to contemporary art-making, including the ways we confuse and separate the persona of an artist from the meaning of his or her work. In contrast to the bravado of most artistic manifestoes, Candyass' "artist's statement" — a badly Xeroxed copy of a clumsily typed document — reads like a banal testimony to personal inadequacy. "I'm not as smart as I would like to be," the artist admits, "and not as politically aware/politically correct as I would like to be." A little further on he suggests that making art is his way of killing time and avoiding the "serious issues." But far from shying away from those issues, Leibowitz's self-consciously superficial

Relationship"). By including photographs of himself — including a frontal nude — he confuses the line between his private and public personas. Where does Candyass begin and Leibowitz leave off? It doesn't really seem to matter. Just as Candyass is trapped within a vocabulary of disposable jokes and novelty items, the artist's identity gets reduced to an algebra of want ads.

For the most part, that apparently desperate lack of originality is where the poignancy of this show lies. The desperation comes across most clearly in the bright colors and exuberant disarray of the installation, a frantic false cheer that mirrors tube culture as well as the upbeat self-promotion engaged in by so many contemporary artists. The biggest problem with a cult of salesmanship — which is what our happy-talk culture adds up to — is that it allows no room for mourning. For all his bitching and moaning, neither does a dysfunctional character like Candyass, and that's the saddest — and most resonant — fact recorded by this persistently whiny show. **A**

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CANDYASS/CARY S LEIBOWITZ
 At SHOSHANA WAYNE GALLERY
 1454 Fifth St., Santa Monica
 Through April 27