

ART & AUCTION

Dan Cameron

I THINK THAT THE group Queer Nation, which promotes the use of positive gay images in media and public life (and also fights antigay discrimination and violence), should give Jesse Helms a good citizenship award. My argument, which might seem a bit wrongheaded at first, nevertheless has an undeniable logic to it: one of the very few positive outcomes of the recent attacks in the U.S. on freedom of expression in the arts is the radically altered status of gay art.

Not only has the role that a gay sensibility seems to be playing in mainstream American art changed, but the artists' own strategy in establishing the premises for their work has altered quite considerably as well. In particular, there is the whole formulation of gay art as expressing a minority point of view. The 1980s, which fused the devastation of AIDS and the critique of representation engendered by Neo-Conceptualism, changed all that, in the sense that gay artists are no longer seen as speaking only for their own community, but for everyone else as well. Add to this the unique case of Robert Mapplethorpe—a much-loved artist within the art world whose work inadvertently threatened (before the October acquittal of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati) to create a landmark legal precedent for obscenity, but whose name and reputation are now correctly being seen as unfairly maligned by the strong-arm tactics of the self-proclaimed art police—and you have all the makings of a genuine underground culture pushed to the forefront of American sociopolitical discourse.

Of the many curious effects brought about by these recent changes, perhaps the most unpredictable has been the reaction of the art establishment itself. Although an outspoken gay perspective has always been welcome in some quarters, the art world is also home to a great deal of latent and even public homophobia. This has traditionally led to a vicious circle, in which museums won't support the work because collectors won't buy it because galleries won't show it. This Catch-22 situation seems to be a far cry from autumn 1990, when several of the most

(critical edge)

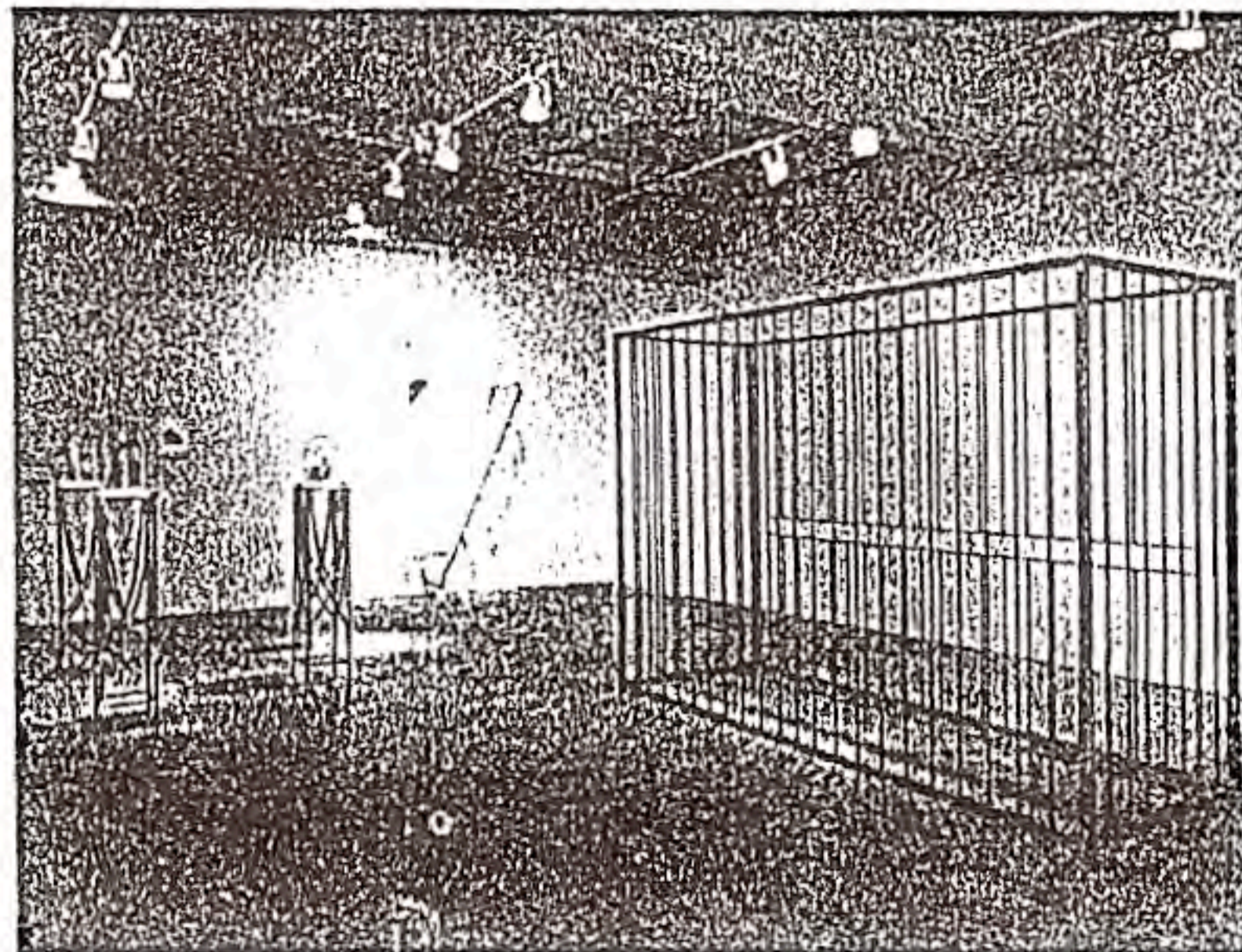
THE SEXUAL IS CULTURAL

Leibowitz (whose *nom de guerre* is Candy Ass) had previously created environmental installations incorporating photos of nude muscle men and little canvases proclaiming, "I love Jeff Koons" and "I love Sherrie Levine," his artistic persona in this exhibition was considerably less coy. Although references to sexuality still abounded, the theme of the new work seemed to be that more generalized social archetype, the loser. Embracing the current vogue for "pathetic" art, Leibowitz hung on the gallery wall a pair of pants that proclaimed, "Kick

Me," and lined up stuffed chimps on the floor in an arrangement that would have been truly disarming were it not for its close affinity to the work of Mike Kelley.

If Leibowitz's obsessive self-identification with the role of the underdog at times begs the question of who's oppressing whom, the art of the collaborative team of Pruitt-Early makes a lot of gay people uncomfortable because of its elaborate lionizing of adolescent male sexuality—that is, heterosexuality. Pinup girls, fast cars, stacked beer cans with decals and heavy metal insignia abounded in the pair's debut exhibition in September at 303 Gallery, which might have appeared to the uninformed as if Richard Prince had had Gilbert and George's illegitimate baby. The reasoning behind the artists' stylized use of heterosexual clichés seems to have as much to do with a commentary upon the straight monopoly of depictions of masculinity in contemporary society as with the more subversive relationship between "sophisticated" homosexuals and "naive" straight men in the complex mythology of gay seduction.

Whatever the intent in their identification with heterosexuality, however, Pruitt-Early's strategy seems to have made them some enemies in the Correct Politics



Nayland Blake's work straddles a narrow line between the furtive codification of gay desire and the aesthetic demands of antiobject sculpture. Here, his installation at SoHo's Petersburg Gallery.

Department: The announcement for the show consisted of a decal that the prospective viewer was to place on a Miller beer can, a tactic that would not have drawn any attention had the gay activist group ACT-UP not declared a boycott of Miller only a couple of weeks before. Neither side decided to make a public confrontation on the matter, but judging from the debate that arose on an informal level in the corridors of SoHo, it is clear that part of Pruitt-Early's message is that being a gay artist in the '90s does not involve lining up behind anyone else's agenda.

Larry Clark's exhibition of photos and photocollages at Lühring Augustine in September dealt with similar issues, and probably also made a lot of people angry, but for radically different reasons. Clark, who is straight, attracted notoriety years ago with his book of photos, *Teenage Lust*, which provided highly sympathetic views of young junkies and male hustlers. In the Lühring Augustine show, he took a further step in his current work by presenting a number of pieces that draw a connection between the careers of several teen idols—Corey Haim and Kevin Dillon figure prominently, for example—and the drugs-and-prostitution underground that the artist knows so well. Although much of Clark's work has a fictive edge, and he often makes use of models whose most striking characteristics are their resemblance to his better-known, real-life subjects, the arresting emotional honesty that he brings to everything he makes forces the viewer to examine the supposedly "wholesome" thrust of the teen heartthrob industry and its assembly line of man-boy stars in a completely different light.

Nayland Blake, a West Coast sculptor who was unknown a year ago, made one of the most keenly awaited debuts of the last few seasons, at Petersburg Gallery in October. (He is also one of the six young sculptors currently showcased in the Whitney Museum of American Art's "Mind Over Matter" exhibition.) Blake, whose work embraces a number of varied styles and media, is a bit less ambiguous than his East Coast colleagues when it comes to leaving any question in the viewer's mind about which side of the sexuality divide he likes his art

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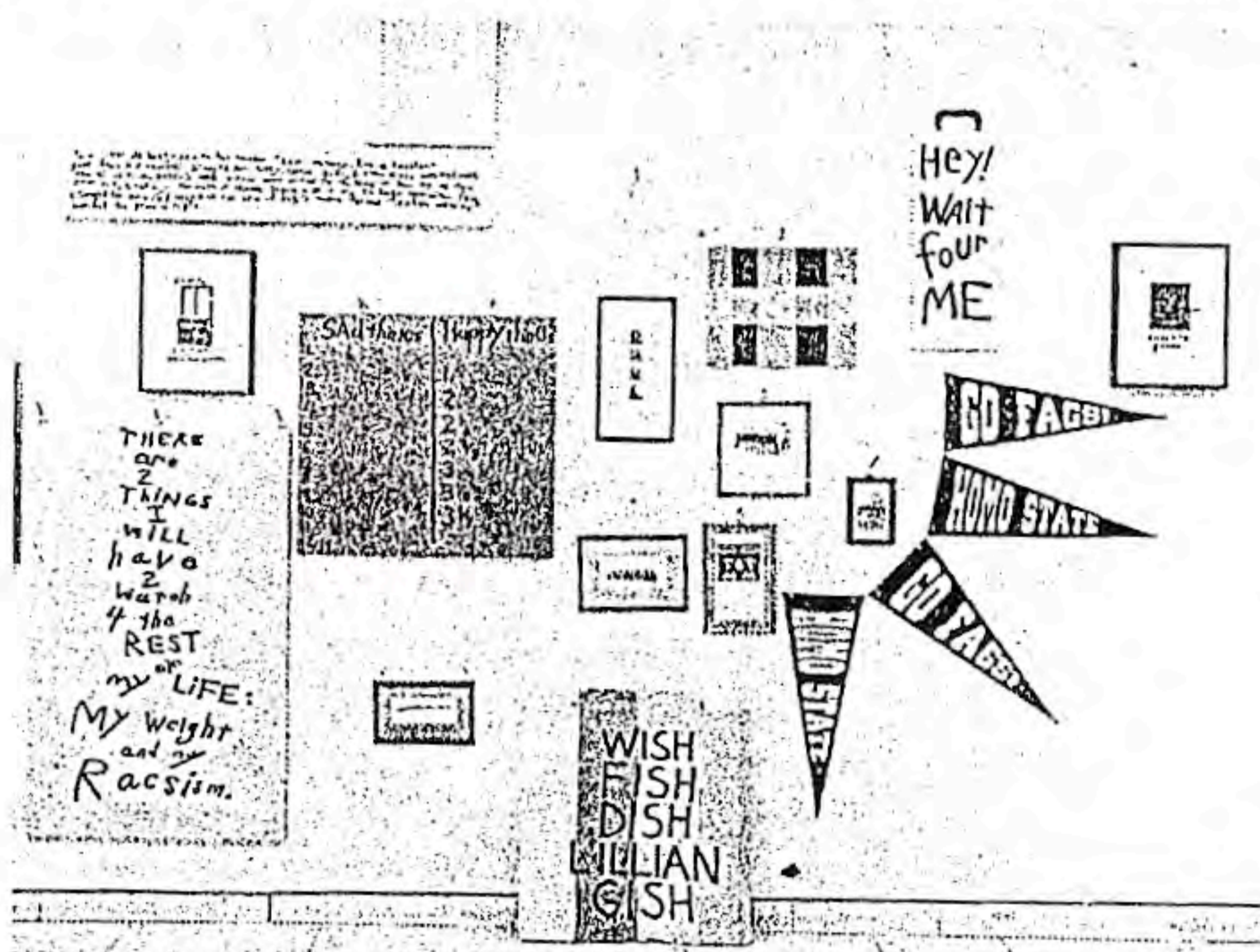
to fall on. Entitled "Low" in mocking homage to the Museum of Modern Art's "High and Low" exhibition, the show made clear that Blake's current work straddles a narrow line between the furtive codification of gay desire and the aesthetic demands of the new antiobject sculpture. For example, two large, tarplike wall pieces convey a curiously mixed identity as both "serious" sculpture (works by Robert Morris and Franz Erhard Walther are the most obvious precedents) and textbook examples of the type of body-restraint devices often used in sadomasochistic sex. A large, prisonlike cage makes use of a long, waist-high aperture to suggest a more complicated relationship between prisoners and their guards. Even where Blake deliberately conceals his references, they can still be decoded as if they are part of the language of a secret society. One work in the show that consists of a series of bisected panels with small colored ridges on top seems

to be no more provocative than a Gunther Forg—until it is pointed out that each of the color "pairs" is derived from the language of colored handkerchiefs that were worn in the back pockets of gay men in San Francisco and New York during the 1970s and early '80s. With nearly 100 different categories, the color and side on which the handkerchief was worn indicated precisely what the wearer was looking for,

thereby saving the effort of getting into a conversation with an intriguing stranger only to find out he had something completely different in mind—or, worse still, the exact same thing!

This wry combination of humor and self-consciousness has helped establish Blake as one of the most promising young artists of the moment, gay or straight, and explains why his art is helping to set standards for how artists will henceforth choose to handle such previously touchy topics as sexuality and art. No longer on the defensive, but equally unwilling to accept a second-rate, ghettoized status, Blake and his contemporaries seem to be bringing new meaning to that counterculture chestnut of the '60s, "The personal is political." The difference in the 1990s would seem to be that the sexual, however variously defined, is cultural as well. (AGA)

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Although references to gay sexuality still abound, the theme of Cary Leibowitz's recent work, such as this installation at the Stux Gallery, is that more generalized social archetype, the loser.