

Art

The Mimics and Their Messages

Snap Shots of the '80s At the Hirshhorn

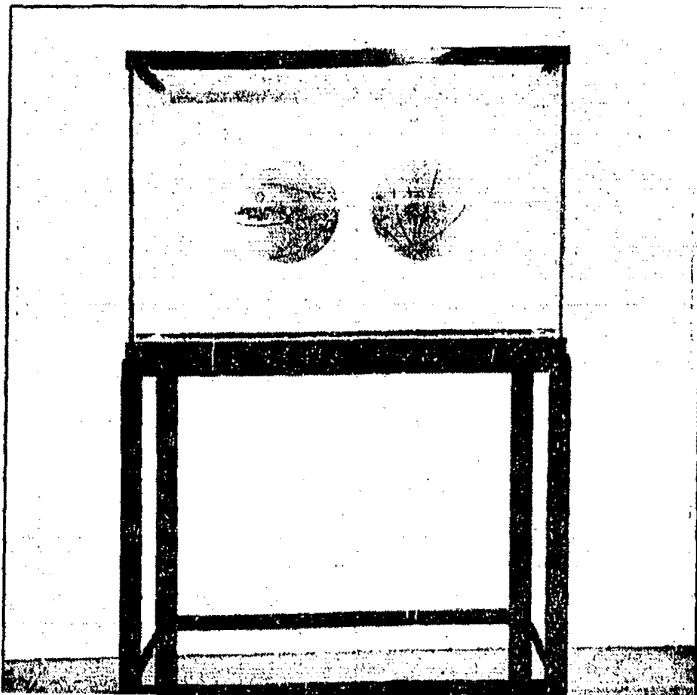
By Paul Richard
Washington Post Staff Writer

"Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective," the roundup of usual suspects that opened yesterday at the Hirshhorn, is, by in-group art-world standards, Manhattan's in particular, a shiny piece of work. It's unthreateningly familiar, relentlessly postmodern, exceptionally coherent, politically correct. Boston's Kathy Halbreich, the guest curator who picked the 60 objects in it, has a nice grasp of her subject. She's true to the dead heroes who haunt her exhibition—Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp. She has an eye for installation and a vivid turn of phrase.

There's nothing wrong with her show except its art.

Viewers seeking paintings here might as well forget it. Of the 15 artists she has chosen from around the world (more than half of them New Yorkers), there are only two—Francesco Clemente and Julian Schnabel—who bother to paint pictures, and both men do so bumptiously, though in the context of this show any touch of

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Above, American artist Jeff Koons's
"Two Balls 80/50 Tank" (1985).



Francesco Clemente's 1984 "Sun,"
tempera on paper mounted on cloth.



Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura's
1988 "Doublemura (Marcel)."



Julian Schnabel's 1987 "Self-Portrait in
Andy's Shadow."

Hirshhorn's 'Culture'

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handmade messiness, any surface roughness, comes as a relief.

Sleekness is the key here, the untouched-by-human-hands sleekness of the glassed-in box, the photo lab transparency, the stainless steel casting, the clean white typeset page, the television screen. A mental sleekness too, a cool ironic distance, is wrapped around this art.

This show could make one pity the embattled avant-garde.

Halbreich much approves of what one might call quick-hit, one-shot art. Almost all her artists rely on our impatience. Whatever one absorbs from Jeff Wall's blown-up mock-heroic transparencies of workers—or from Robert Gober's wallpaper, Laurie Anderson's video, Cindy Sherman's dressed-up portraits of herself, or Jenny Holzer's wordy lists—is absorbed at a glance.

Of the 60 varied works of art gathered for this show, there is only one—the functional and complicated “Reading Room” composed by Siah Armajani—that I have any interest in seeing more than once. Part furniture, part sculpture, part intricate suggestion of constructivist complexity, Armajani's installation is a user-friendly, pause-inviting, eye-delecting place for meditation.

Ambitious artists once competed with the masters. Most of these don't. Instead they choose to mock what Halbreich calls “the prescriptive, repressively mainstream vision” of the art in the museums. “By questioning the primacy of authorship, uniqueness, and formalism, some artists, both female and male, pictured themselves outside a system that valorized the supposedly heroic antics of white men. . . .” If authenticity is bad, if originality is bad, and if white men's art (Halbreich cites “the heroics of the brush, the ‘hisness of history’”) is especially egregious, well, there's always theft.

But theft suggests a touch of guilt. Anxiety and worry and the plagiarist's self-doubt are emotions unacceptable to most of these 15. They don't steal, they “appropriate.” Jeff Koons appropriates the mass-produced and shining things he spots in shop windows—vacuum cleaners, toys, Jim Beam booze containers. (Koons, it must be said, has a fine malicious edge; his two-basketball-in-a-fish-tank is a peculiarly memorable piece of nicely nasty bafflement.) Koons democratically appropriates (as Warhol did so often) the trashy, the commercial. Japan's Yasumasa Morimura appropriates, and goes with, works by Western masters, Manet, say, or Ingres, Duchamp and

Man Ray. Sherrie Levine does her appropriations with excruciating baldness.

Levine is known for photographing photographs. Here she is once again represented by photographs she's made of photographs of Southerners made during the Depression by the late Walker Evans—though this time she is doing so with an unexpected twist. Are you ready? She is showing Evans's images not in positive, but in negative!

Halbreich, and not Halbreich only, detects within such borrowings a high subversive purpose, a critique of originality and, equally important, of the male domination of the history of art. “As most often told,” she writes, “the history of art excludes the accomplishments of women. . . . In order to penetrate the male point of view—to critique generations of masterpieces by men and understand the loneliness of the female perspective—Levine has spent a decade redoing the art of Modernism.” But suppose Levine had photographed an equally familiar, equally compassionate portrait of a proud and underfed Depression-era Southerner by Dorothea Lange. What would happen then to her critique of male domination?

On the cover of the catalogue are four deconstructed images: the AIDS virus, the Challenger exploding, a microchip and a detail of the 1,000-yen note. The argument is this: This show is commenting on our culture. The artists here encountered, unlike their art-for-art's sake predecessors, are calling our attention to the '80s' many sins.

“As the rich got richer, the Earth poorer, and those sick with AIDS closer to dying, faith in the future, which failed to trickle down from a president made in Hollywood, wavered,” explains Halbreich. Money, and the media, ruled. Racism persisted. “The decade witnessed the proliferation of repeats, reprocessing, reproduction, and repression.” And these chic, expensive artists, so we are to believe, responded to such horrors with right-minded concern.

Holzer's “truisms” displayed here in long lists—“Thinking too much can only cause problems,” “Money creates taste,” “Murder has its sexual side”—are not just inanities, they're “impassioned yet coolly conceived investigations of the intersection of public and private in the age of Big Brother electronics, congressional attacks on freedom of speech, and a fading federal social conscience.” Holzer's “Under a Rock” of 1986 was seen “by some” as “commenting on the government's refusal to inform the public about or force-



Cindy Sherman's 1982 color photograph “Untitled No. 109.”

fully acknowledge the issues surrounding AIDS.” Sure. And Levine's Walker Evanses are about male domination, and Mom, in Laurie Anderson's “O Superman,” “transnigrifies into mother country, a malevolent superpower whose ‘long arms’ are electronic and petrochemical weapons that promise only a morbid embrace.”

Anyone can play this game. Robert Gober's closet is about coming out of same, and his wallpaper—which pairs images of a black man hanging from a tree and a white man sleeping—is about the nightmare of racism, and Jeff Wall's photographs of workers say “Up the Common Man,” and the Common Woman too.

One of Tony Cragg's wall pieces is a huge Mercedes logo made of bricks and bottles supposedly retrieved from a demonstration in Berlin opposing a visit of Henry Kissinger. (Why didn't the bottles break? one wonders.) The message of this work, or so one supposes, is that under the aegis of American warmongers, the peace sign of the '60s has been turned into a symbol of capitalistic wealth.

But under the deadpan polish of these costly works of art, such messages convey the most conventional political sort of political posturing. One can't escape the image of the wealthiest collectors, in their mink coats and their Guccis, being softly whipped by such condemnatory messages while wandering the galleries, trying to keep up with the newest in new art.

A decay of traditional gender roles—which links Anderson's man's

suit to Schnabel's portrait of a man in drag to Morimura's recasting of himself as Krose Selavy or as an Ingres nude—is one theme of this show. An enhancement of junk—which ties Cragg's bits of broken plastic to Katharina Fritsch's plaster madonnas to Koons's Jim Beam souvenirs, Holzer's truisms and Gober's stink-concealing kitty litter bags—is another. A headlong imitation of the smoothness and manipulations of the media's images and ads is a familiar third.

This show reminds us, painfully, how often modern art museums mimic one another, marching in dull lock step to the agreed-on party line. While wandering through Halbreich's show (she is now employed by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts), it is distressing to recall how many of her colleagues, in too many institutions, insist upon a reading of the art of the last decade sadly similar to hers.

At least her exhibition is coherently and thoughtfully and intricately composed; at least it excludes David Salle, Barbara Kruger and Sandro Chia; at least it offers us a chance to happily explore Armajani's reading room (among the newspapers and magazines he is offering the visitor are catalogues that praise the other artists in the show). Fashions wither quickly. Much of Halbreich's art feels three years old already. And if perchance it represents the best and most memorable new art of the '80s, at least we can be thankful that that decade is over.

“Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective” closes on May 6.