

All Quiet on the Western Front Espace Dieu

The "Western" in *All Quiet on the Western Front* might be a geographic joke within Paris—a Bastille district gallery's remote warehousing of this exhibition beyond the Place de la Republique—but the question, "What does the Remarque remark mean?" must take into consideration that the show is all-American. If the United States is what is west of Paris, now, doesn't the exhibition translate that there is no noise being made in the United States? It is typically Parisian to undertake a grand importation of news only to decide that there is no news. In any case, scads of thoughtful, intellectual, promising young American artists—Alan Belcher, Howard Halle, Susan Silas, Aura Rosenberg, Kirsten Mosher, Nicolas Rule, and Orshi Drozdik, to name a few—had fine pieces wantonly tossed aside and wasted in the five-level space. As a whole, the installation was a department-store disaster, but the novelty of seeing the local (New York) talent in Paris was amusing. A traveling point of view is critically concerned with how well familiar work travels. Paris will decide who's who in American art in its own way. The critic, however, can be open to all he or she has learned about French taste in Paris, then see which American artworks register on that surmise. Such preliminary blips of cultivation are clues to broader points of views. At the very least, they stamp American art with a French visa, suggesting which sensibilities will move best. A few works stood out in this context, and they seemed to travel well.

Curtis Mitchell's lard-filled bustier, which primped with light operatic bluster, seemed perfectly haughty in the city of Venus de Milo, and his maniacally decapitated case of beer bottles packaged "America in decline" for Parisian condescension. Kenneth Goldsmith's white rowing oars inscribed with dictionary isms—egoist, Modernist, kukluxist, hystericist—acted as trenchant divining rods in a city full of the ghosts of isms upon isms. Matthew Weinstein (here and in *Vertigo*) had big red abstractions that were touchingly embarrassed by the audacity of bringing such abstraction back to School of Paris-land. Cheryl Donegan's plastic Dis-comforter played embroidered pink slits and other intimate shapes off a Duchampian visual trick: foreign packaging, uncomfortable bedding, longed-for intimacy, the tendency toward errant flirtation when traveling, all registered in this sweet but antsy work. Nancy Dwyer's *Get Off* echoed up the four tiers of the warehouse atrium, ratcheting upward from "GET" to "OFF" to "GET OFF," grabbing, repulsing, and coming up with new meanings all over the place. Aura Rosenberg's fount-form for her signature rocks-off, Joseph Nechvatal's cube form, and Cary S. Leibowitz's rug laid under an office desk (*VOTRE BITE ICI*) also seemed to concede to a certain post-structuralist religiosity on the French-Catholic side of the Atlantic. The best piece in the whole department store of art, however, was William Stone's wooden stairs inset with Kleenex dispensers. There was something so tender and ill, so suicidal and vertiginous, so viral and paranoid, and yet so

picaresque, innocent, and safe about this image; it summed up all the quietness Paris pretends to see on its Western Front—a sleepwalker immune from the noise of waking life about to be woken by a bad cold.

—ROBERT MAHONEY