

The Aesthetics of Cute

By Kim Levin

We like to imagine the future as a place where people loved abstraction before they encountered sentimentality.

—Sherrrie Levine, 1984

Yet another East Village show has just opened out of town, this time in Glen Cove, Long Island. According to the press release, the curator "spent months traveling throughout the East Village, meeting with the many artists who inhabit it," and returned to North Shore civilization with the booty—a grand total of seven artists' work. Bring 'em back alive, as the great white hunters used to say.

There may be as many versions of East Village art as there are curators tackling the subject. So, after seeing a few East Village shows out of their native habitat, one thing becomes clear: with so many artists to choose from, and with work that's wildly uneven (and sometimes underdeveloped), selection is all, though context plays its role, too. Janet Kardon's "The East Village Scene" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia last fall (will open in Coral Gables, Florida, in March) looked like a mock-up of some future Whitney Biennial: uncharacteristically large, elegant works spaciouly displayed in a clean white space. She selected so well (Scharf's *Jungle Juice* was a winner) that she managed to take the East Village out of East Village art; but then Scharf, Haring, and Basquiat, three of her stars, aren't exactly East Village anymore. In her upbeat, unfunked, cleaned-up show, all the work looked Neo-Pop and eminently respectable. Is it possible to gentrify art?

On the other hand, Holly Solomon's recently closed East Village survey "57th Between A and D" more accurately captured the EV mix of chatchkas, sleaze,

Keith Haring's naughty Mickey Mouse. In the East Village, even appropriation tends to be cute. Haring and Scharf are Old Masters of Cute.

Consider also a few current shows. Kiely Jenkins has turned Fun Gallery (254 East 10th Street, through February 10) into two ossified tableaux. The more interesting inner sanctum is a fake-pine rec room in which are displayed "New Fish and Wildlife." These latest mock trophies include *Duke*, a drooling Great Dane; *Spike*, a tough-guy bulldog with a

called pseudo-Photo-Realist—are slickly photographic, soft-focus black and white. Their surfaces are embellished with pseudo-graffiti and colored squiggles that look like thick paint, but this thickness is simulated, too: they're Abstract Illusionist and flat as picture windows. If the models had been exhibited along with the paintings, the show might make the closed-circuit painting/sculpture connection a number of artists are presently attempting. But in these somewhat suspect paintings there's just the curious

"Zhay are doing Peccasso," murmured a French spectator. Zhay are also doing Herve di Ross, Keith Haring, Futura, the Cabbage Patch Kids, and Betsy Johnson. In this opportunistic show their work is so crowded together that it could be a roomful of wallpaper swatches—for kid's rooms.

Another kind of Cute, in one of P. S. 1's rooms (46-01 21st Street, Long Island City, through March 10), is Rhonda Zwilling's Neo-Pop bedroom ensemble, *Mixed Metaphor*. It's like an answer across the years to Oldenberg's famous bedroom installation, showing what happened to Pop sensibility and fake zebra fur between the '60s and the '80s. Dripping with sequins and paillettes, embellished with painted insets of tropical sunsets, this set plays with grownup glamour and attains new levels of kitsch, glitz, and artificiality. It completes its glittery promise by reaching a saturation point. It transcends its own cuteness.

The relevant question to be asked: Is the Aesthetic of Cute a last-ditch neo-

ART

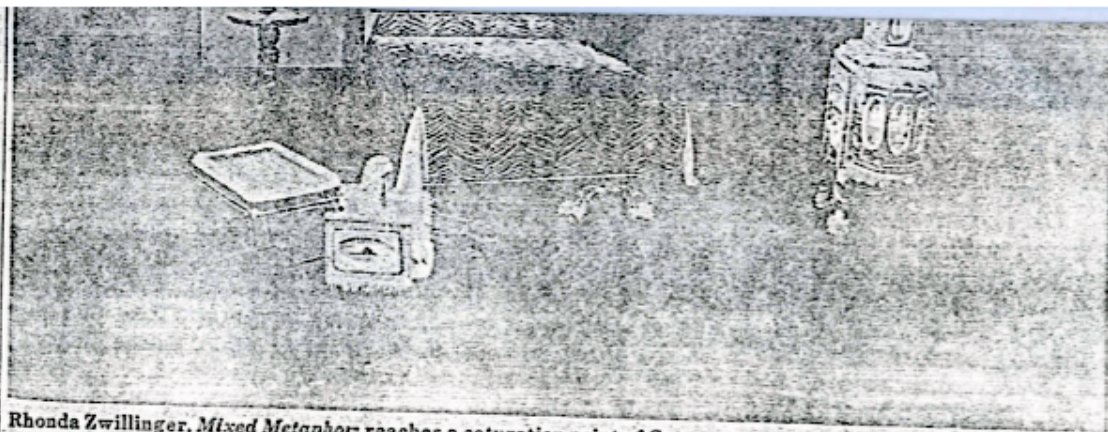
East Village appropriation is Cute. Haring and Scharf are Old Masters of Cute.



the work ranged from day-glow decor and post-graffiti to the surreal and the somber (and was little as well as big), what stood out were the furniture pieces that provided the first generation of Pattern and Decoration artists with some younger, fresher, more raucous (or more decorative) cohorts. Who would have thought a couple of years ago that the rude beast slouching out of the East Village would be Neo-Decorative? And again, it may have been the context, but the Neo-Surreal abstractions by Peter Schuyff, Will Mentor, and Thierry Cheverney looked highly decorative, too. Even Mike Bidlo's classic Pollock came across more as pattern than simulation.

Down in Tribeca at Hal Bromm, another recent show of mostly East Village art called "New Painting" made the belated point that "Painting is new again. Paint on canvas is back." (By the time you read this, its sequel, "New Sculpture," will be opening.) Back in the East Village they're talking about a "post-East Village renaissance," in other words, a second generation of EV art. "The only ism in the East Village is plagiarism," writes curator Robert Costa (paraphrasing Dorothy Parker) in the press release for a show (now closed) called "Start Again."

Meanwhile, on my treks through the area, I see more and more art that adheres to what I'm beginning to think of as the Aesthetic of Cute. It can be cutely naughty or naughtily cute. Awfulness and artificiality are usually components. Consider Rodney Alan Greenblat's bar-mitzvah boy furniture, Auste's adolescent ink illustrations, or the countless artists, Rick Prol (billed as "the personification of the East Village") among them, who transform the agonies of Expressionism into stylized punkish cartoons. It's not that Cute Art is necessarily bad: consider Bonnie Lucas's pink baby-stuff assemblages, Julie Wachtel's paintings of saccharine creatures appropriated from greeting cards, or, Gracien Bender's most memorable appropriation, that of



Rhonda Zwillinger, *Mixed Metaphor*: reaches a saturation point of Cute

mean tattoo; *Poopsie*, a pink poodle with false eyelashes; plus a battle-scarred teddy bear and some hungover fish—all with Garfield-the-cat's comically bulbous crossed eyes, by now a trademark of Jenkins's urban wildlife. The outer sanctum is a marbled "Hall of Shame" in which commemorative busts of Mayor Koch (missing his drool the day I was there), boxing promoter Don King, and Barry Manilow (missing altogether the day I was there) are displayed on pedestals. Within its cute packaging, this work, like that of some of the artists mentioned above, contains all the right ingredients: social comment, political satire, ecological irony—and artificially preserved life-forms. But Jenkins's even cuter trachhouse tableau inside an old Zenith console TV (at the Holly Solomon EV show) made the same points more effectively.

There's more cuteness—even cuteness—at Semaphore East (157 Avenue B, through February 10), where Daryl Trivieri is showing airbrush "portraits" of bug-eyed little monsters (from the same galaxy as Gremlins or E.T.) that the artist first creates as doll-size papier-mâché models. The paintings—which could be

twist of turning Photo-Realism into science fiction souvenirs and painting into pure phoniness. And speaking of space games, a group show called "Computer Age" at New Math (508 East 12th Street, February 10), full of light-box photographic work and computer-generated hyperappropriations, mounts semipornographic video games by Bronson Eden (shoot the flying phallus and it goes limp, miss and it aims for a mouth) and David Good (dysfunctional the day I was there). They may be offensive, but you've got to admit: they're Cute.

Also Cute is (are) Ripoulin, at Tony Shafrazi's East Village outlet in Soho (163 Mercer Street, through February 9). Ripoulin's the name of a brand of paint, also the appropriated name of the cutest second generation (or are they third?) of Eurograffiti artists who have brought their Frenchified version of street art to town, bragging that they don't have a seal of approval from any minister of culture. Their tags (*comment dit-on "tags" en français?*) are Closky, Manhu, Piro-Kao, Faucheur (familiar from last year's EV walls), OX, 3 Carrés, and Blá+Blá+Blá. The poster for their show looks like an old new wave record cover or fashion ad.

phyte attempt to continue the modern tradition of art that shocks, or the ultimate capitulation to bourgeois taste? In an art scene where crassness is often confused with energy, where prolific output stands in for vitality, and where talent without selectivity runs amok, it's logical that cuteness can equal novelty—which for some time has been an acceptable substitute for the new.

But let's consider the possibility that Cute is also a genuine sensibility. Shockingly nonshocking, the aesthetic of Cute finds its schlock imagery in novelty items, gadgety gift shops, nauseatingly clever Hallmark cards. Cute can either critique or accept lower middle class suburban taste: it's scary that you never quite know which. A threat only to die-hard modernists, Cute is accessible to the masses, permits anyone to be an artist, allows everyone their 15 minutes of sniggering fame. This sounds like what Warhol and Beuys were advocating a decade or two ago. Yet, is Cute what we really wanted, to have everything turned into a cartoon or joke? Are East Village natives now making Tourist Art? Did the 20th century, seeking truth, banish the beautiful and end up with the Cute?