

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 1992 \$7.00 SF \$15

INTERNATIONAL





Fairfield Porter, *Backyards*, 1975, oil on canvas, 30 x 22".



Kenny Scharf, *El Gnuj*, 1992, acrylic, oil, and silkscreen ink on canvas with aluminum, 59 1/2 x 61 1/2".



Ava Gerber, *Golden Shower*, 1992, urine, metal, plastic, and yarn, dimensions variable. Installation view.

KENNY SCHARF

ONY SHAFRAZI GALLERY

The introduction of a crusade for a clean environment into Kenny Scharf's work, though not insincere, apparently did not raise his consciousness to the point that he actually was able to relinquish his own use of toxic chemicals. In his most recent show, pulled together just before he abandoned his New York studio for fresh digs in Miami, Scharf seemed anxious to prove he had moved from being carnival master of the art world to occupying an eco-activist seat in the arena of international politics.

Indeed, one has to question whether the nearly 100 works on view added up to a sign of abundant passion or merely to an unnecessary display of excess. Not often is so much missionary zeal lavished on a single theme. Scharf's works can be full of jolly-trucking fun; indeed, they are most engaging and effective when completely off-the-wall. The assemblages, which he calls "lixoballs" and "lixowalls," after the Portuguese word for "rubbish" (*lixo*), possess the visual interest and party-hat poetry lacking in his paintings. Made entirely of a gay profusion of discarded or washed-up objects found on beaches and set into a poisonous core of hardened insulating foam, they look a little like plastic John Chamberlains in a Sputnik phase.

On canvas or on Sheetrock reclaimed from his former studio walls, the usual Scharf iconography—hot snakes, tousle-topped trees, and lascivious lizards—creeps over silkscreened images of early-'60s white-American bliss (floating catalogue-page ads for bug and weed killer and cautionary news headlines), seemingly unsure whether the latter are the sacred fetishes of popular experience or merely directly re-

sponsible for poking more holes in the ozone layer.

There's no doubt that Scharf is a 20th-century-loving boy. He's fond of electronic gadgets and home appliances, Robert Kennedy and cars with big fins, while claiming an inheritance from Kurt Schwitters, Jean Arp, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. For the most part, however, Scharf's effort to combine his obsessional devotion to received images with his worthy campaign to save the rainforest is just too slick and tired to give these works much real depth.

—Linda Yablonsky

AVA GERBER

FICTION/NONFICTION

It seemed that every corner of the gallery was littered with detritus, in the form of nearly 30 filthy, scrappy assemblages. Using dirt, hair, mildewed clothing, and other repulsive materials, Ava Gerber created a stale, claustrophobic environment; the space, covered with trailing wire and strings, resembled a spider's web.

In several pieces dirt, the archenemy of housewives, became a metaphor for the female self, depicting the underside of femininity as hideously abject. In *Head in the Clouds* (all works 1992) a small "cloud" of pressed dirt hung near a larger version of the same quatrefoil cloud shape made of a wire armature festooned with black acrylic hair. The depression this work implied yielded to illness in *IV*, in which inflated paper bags hung from the ceiling by invisible wire, each attached to a neatly molded ball of dirt on the floor by a length of black ribbon. Refusing to allow herself to be made into a perishable object, Gerber instead rendered everything she came into contact

with perishable. In *Carrot Top*, wax-dipped carrots hanging from a beige garter belt were suspended from a padded hanger to form a gruesome mobile, the phallic remains of the carrots visibly rotting.

At once lovely and sickening, *Golden Shower* was a kind of screen or curtain made of plastic baggies full of urine; its range of colors, from pale yellow to nearly red, suggested illness, forming a perverse reliquary evocative of a medieval mystic's delight in the putrid. A wax-covered corset was hung from satin ribbons, sister to the girdle that crushed Snow White, while the long, loose, and braided tresses of *Change the Locks* evoked—by way of Rapunzel—the dark territory of the Brothers Grimm, in whose stories female puberty is depicted as a dangerous passage involving enchantment, disappearance, seduction, and, sometimes, even entrapment and servitude.

Parental figures are the ghostly targets of much of Gerber's anger. She engages in all kinds of filial heresy, doing much that might hurt a mother: letting hair down everywhere, playing with rotten dough, and fashioning dirt balls the size of oranges. Her sewing reveals compulsive, visible stitches; here there is no binding and healing. The hangers and knitting needles, recurring motifs, become the symbolic weapons of her embattled body and bitter resentment.

Much of this bitterness is reserved for a mother for whom she refuses to double, but the single allusion to a father figure is venomous. *For Fathers* was the least effective piece in the show. A small, framed photograph of pig-tailed Gerber (white) being mounted from behind by a black man, the picture is scrawled with the message "To Daddy, Love and Kisses, Your Ava." Gerber seems, with little success, to be trying to