

## American Dream

*Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York*

*By Ken Johnson*

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Some years ago, at the height of the so-called culture wars, the art critic Robert Hughes wrote a book called "Culture of Complaint," which castigated a lot of people for petty griping and ingratitude. It's an understandable perspective, but it doesn't take into account just how creative and fun complaining can be. Witness "American Dream," an exhibition of works in all media by more than 50 artists that fills Ronald Feldman's regular Mercer Street space as well as two temporarily occupied spacious floors at 419 Broome Street.

Collectively, the show offers a jaundiced picture of its theme, and its particular targets are predictable: racism, sexism, consumerism, drug addiction and so on. Quality is mixed, but there is much invigorating satiric humor and inventive esthetic energy.

Among the most impressive and mordantly funny pieces at Mercer Street is an installation by Tana Hargest that mocks big business and racial politics. It is a slick kiosk for a fictive pharmaceutical company called "Bitter Nigger, Inc." that markets drugs to blacks. Its products include the "negro Teflon medicated" ointment Melinderm and the "go-along to get-along pill" Tominex.

Nancy Chun takes a shot at big drugs, too: her Pop-style painting of an ice cream sundae on a grid of Prozac pills and yellow smiley faces is called "C'mon Get Happy, Get Ready for the Judgment Day." Other notable items include an apocalyptic video of a dishware cabinet in flames, by Reynold Reynolds and Patrick Jolley; and David Sher's big comic painting of American citizens ready for war, which might have been lifted from the pages of Mad magazine.

The better half of the show is at 19 Broome Street, where the expansive space provides more breathing room for larger works. One is greeted by Guy Overfelt's lifesize inflated Pontiac Trans-Am and a thrift shop-style painting of the All-American muscle car with a pair of bikini-clad models. One of Leon Golub's paintings from the 80's, a big picture of two elderly black women sitting on a bench next to a smirking white man in cowboy

boots, still powerfully exudes the disturbingly ambiguous black comedy, smoldering violence and sensuously raw painterly qualities that made this body of work so arresting when it first appeared.

Downstairs is (R)TM mark's "Foodbomb," a barbecue in the form of a bomb for dropping on starving people in war-torn countries. A chart provides helpful operating instructions and an inventory of the bomb's contents, which include hamburger and buns and marshmallows. Other pieces include a nasty send-up of mandarin painting by William Pope.L, an all-over abstraction made with peanut butter; Bjorn Melhus's brilliantly surrealistic talk show video; a fantastic funerary sculpture crocheted by Xenobia Bailey; and by Michael W. Wilson, a glossy copy of a publicity photograph of Attorney General John Ashcroft, signed and frighteningly inscribed with a line from Psalm 32: "I will guide thee with mine eye."

Ken Johnson, March 2003