

A Mixed Casket

Danny Yahav-Brown explores funerals, lifelines and the words "I love you"

By Kelly Klaasmeyer

published: February 05, 2004

The yellow pages are open to "Funeral -- Funeral Homes and Directors" in the large glossy color photograph. In them, David Funeral Directors offers "Burial/Cremation...in the manner of times gone by..." Yikes. Times how far "gone by"? Do they throw carcasses to packs of wild dogs outside the city walls? Maybe they use funeral pyres? A big color display ad on the same page advertises "Houston's Best Value \$3,995.00 Funeral Plan!" The viewer can ponder the significance of the exclamation point while reading that the plan includes a "20-Gauge Steel Protective Casket (Choice of Colors)" as well as such extras as "Embalming," "Hair Dressing" and "Cosmetic Services." The fact that someone is looking for the number of a funeral home implies the death of a loved one or perhaps grim preplanning. Titled *Once in a Lifetime* (2003), the work is melancholy, ironic and morbidly funny, all at the same time.

Courtesy of Inman Gallery



Art within art: Jim Richard's *Dark Landing* depicts flailing abstract sculptures.

Subject(s):

[Danny Yahav-Brown, et al.](#)

The yellow-pages photograph is part of "Exercises in Futility," a new exhibition by Core Fellow **Danny Yahav-Brown** at Mixture Contemporary Art. The show is a meditation on the futility of a 20-gauge steel protective casket, as well as the futility of myriad little exercises in life and love. Yahav-Brown's work is like a wry smile from someone who knows things may be bleak but is trying hard to make the best of it.

Trying to Extend My Lifeline (2003) hangs next to the funeral image and shows the artist's hand and forearm. He has stretched his flesh by placing rubber-coated photo clips at the beginning and end of the lifeline running across his palm. It's a sad and comic image that confronts the all-too-human fear of death with a patently ridiculous solution.

Moving from death to sex, *Making Love in the Men's Bathroom* (2003) isn't what you might expect. There's no hasty coupling in a public john; instead, the photo shows a close-up of Yahav-Brown's hand pressed against a bathroom mirror. In this quietly poetic work, the thumb and forefinger form half the shape of a heart, and their reflection forms the other half.

The photographs are mounted to the underside of pieces of Plexiglas, which gives them an unframed, free-floating visual lushness. In contrast to the slickly professional presence of his photos, Yahav-Brown's sculptures-cum-wall-drawings use quotidian objects to create delicate and ephemeral images.

For *I'll Bring You the Moon* (2003), a tiny dorm-room-esque reading lamp with a clamp is mounted on the wall in the corner. It's aimed at a Styrofoam cup carefully pinned to the adjoining wall. Peering into the coffee-specked interior of the cup, you see that the bottom is missing. The shape of a crescent moon is created on the wall by the cup's shadow. The grandiose desire to give a loved one the moon is tenderly and ironically achieved through cheap, banal artifacts.

A fan and another crappy clamp light that look like they came from the same dollar store are used together in *Now* (2003). The word "now" has been pricked into a piece of acetate with a

pin. Anchored on one side, the piece of acetate flutters in the fan's breeze. The shadow of the word "now," invisible on the clear plastic, intermittently appears on the wall. The emphatic word is made ephemeral and elusive.

A brief video presents another of Yahav-Brown's wry observations. The screen of a sleek laptop displays the lower half of the artist's face. We see his mouth and tongue forming words that could be "I love you" but could also be something else. The text "elephant shoe, (I love you)" appears on the screen. You stand there in front of the screen silently mouthing both phrases back at the video, and your mouth feels the absurd similarity between declaring love and identifying pachyderm footwear. In "Exercises in Futility," Yahav-Brown recruits us as fellow travelers in his exploration of human desire and disappointment.

Through February 28 at Mixture Contemporary Art, 1709 Westheimer, 713-520-6809.

Rooms with Views

At Inman Gallery, **Jim Richard** is pursuing a program of crackpot interior design. Richard scavenges room interiors from magazines and creates collages, pasting in incongruous elements like out-of-scale light fixtures and clunky modern objects d'art. He makes paintings of these redecorated rooms, rendering them with campy, self-consciously cartoonlike flair.

A chandelier, its crystals outlined in black, is an improbably large and low-hung object in the foreground of *Dark Landing* (2003). Flailing abstract sculptures on tiny bases rest awkwardly on an overwhelmed, glass-topped, Queen Anne-legged coffee table. The stair landing referred to in the title looms illogically in the foreground like a badly built film noir set.

Richard emphasizes the abstract in *Wrap-Around Green* (2003). Here, walls and ceiling are covered by vivid green latticed wallpaper with a yellow background, and a door frame with an exaggerated faux bois pattern almost bisects the painting. An oddball tabletop sculpture that looks like a group of conjoined Henry Moore figures acts as a spectator in the foreground. Behind them, "modern" paintings become vivid, stylized decoration.

All the works have a fantastic, over-the-top sense of color and pattern. In the paintings in which Richard fixates on the lush, crowded and oddly furnished interiors, you sense his vicarious thrill in "redecorating" these found, often vintage, environments. But there's also an uneasy feeling -- equal parts claustrophobia and Twilight Zone -- that runs through the otherwise appealing images. You want to look at Richard's paintings and collages, but you sure as hell don't want to live in them.

Through February 28 at Inman Gallery, 214 Travis, 713-222-0844.

Urban Planning

In **Luis Mallo's** large color photographs, the patterns and surfaces of chain-link fences and graffiti-covered, rusted sheets of metal become curtains that reveal and conceal urban vistas. In his exhibition "In Camera" at Sicardi Gallery, Mallo displays his mastery of found compositions, isolating compelling forms in industrial urban environments. The compositions strike you first, then you realize what they're really portraying. In one work, he hones in on vertical clusters of tree trunks, tightly sandwiching them between the horizontal sheen of corrugated metal and the diamond patterns of a chain-link fence. A metal panel -- all flaking paint and marker scrawls -- dominates another photograph; a rusted triangular hole in its surface provides a glimpse of the rounded form of a water tower in the distance, and below it, a rectangular gap reveals the

receding vertical lines of a railroad yard. Mallo bends the unattractively industrial to his will.

Through February 7 at Sicardi Gallery, 2246 Richmond, 713-529-1313.

Sloughing Off

In the main gallery at Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, **Michael Toenges** is showing tiny paintings that look like they've seceded from some monumentally larger impasto work. Thick, three-dimensional smears of paint extend beyond the edges of their panels and feel like a floating collection of brush strokes. And in the entry gallery, you can see **Chris Akin's** drawings, which wittily continue the fine multitasking tradition of artists making art at their day jobs. Akin is a guard at the Menil Collection; to make his work, he discreetly sketches in between telling people not to touch stuff. He folds sheets of paper into eighths and makes his crisp line drawings in each section separately, giving them a kind of "exquisite corpse" aspect, as if he were playing the surrealist game with himself. You can see the environmental influence of the Menil in images derived from the patterns of its dark wood floors and the shapes of its modern artworks.

Through February 13 at Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, 4520 Blossom Street, 713-863-7097.