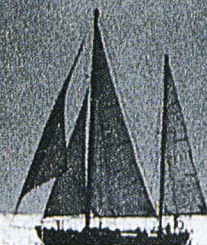


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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



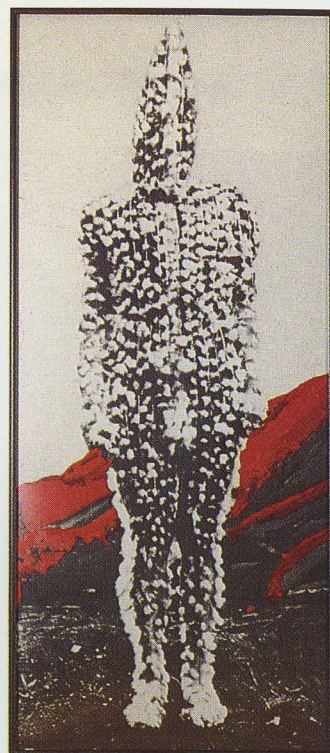
domestic science

CHARLES V. MILLER



Elaine Reichek, *Cameroon*, 1984, mixed media, 56 x 52". From the "Dwelling" series.
Collection of the Prudential Insurance Company of America.

"Ernst ist das Leben, heiter die Kunst" (Life is serious, art is frivolous). So read the placards of the villagers in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The old lady's visit, 1956, published in English as *The Visit*), and the work of Elaine Reichek almost suggests that she agrees: though she deals with the serious sciences of anthropology and ethnography, her art itself is always ironic, sometimes humorously — frivolously — so. Yet neither author nor artist is in the same position as the characters in the play. Applying the absolutes of myth to the morality of Europe's postwar economic recovery, Dürrenmatt shows us a people lured by the attraction of capital, and doomed by it — a people colonized by a richer outside power. His stance is critical and accusatory. Reichek, on the other hand, "decolonizes" colonized peoples,



Elaine Reichek, *Feather Man* and *Striped Man*, both 1986, mixed media, ca. 66 x 118" overall. From the "Tierra del Fuego" series. The latter in private collection.

breathing new and different life into their images and shifting our perceptions of the colonial experience. Her figures, dwellings, and photocollages live in a spectral world of photographic halides and emanate from a mediated life of artistic materials.

The problems involved in representing and giving voice to the Other have been widely discussed in recent years, as a subject both of the social sciences and of art criticism. Perhaps any culture may have difficulty in understanding whatever seems to lie outside it, in perceiving in that unfamiliar presence anything beyond what its own eyes have learned to see. The issue for us, however, is that our Western culture, in the vast majority of its relationships, has been the dominant partner, and has set the terms of the exchange. It has been European and North American; its color has been primarily white, its sex male. And as it has spread around the world, always making pictures to send home, it has harmonized, homogenized, normalized the voice of the Other.

Today the West's expansionist spirit—the spirit of the explorers, to use a European model, or of the pioneers, in an American one—is running out of wide open spaces to colonize. (The "space" in the term "space program" may be more than the area above the air.) But the Romantic spirit, the all-encompassing Fichtean ego that tries always to re-create the world in its own image—to recolonize it—lives on, propelling artists such as Lothar Baumgarten, for example, to collect around themselves the vestiges of colonial power. For work like his is a kind of ventriloquism. The names or signs

of the Other may fill the gallery, but they speak with the voice of the artist, who has made them an extension of his or her own persona. The artist's world becomes *the* world; no other voice is heard.

Reichek's work, on the other hand, does not grow out of an "objective" ethnographic/anthropological method like Margaret Mead's (or like Baumgarten's, a group of whose works were inspired by stays in South America). Instead, a constant element of irony (directed at the artist as much as at anyone else) mediates between the actual references of the images she uses and our perception of them. In one of the several found images that make up the photocollage *Desert Song*, 1987, for example, Reichek's face replaces that of a properly clad Victorian woman atop a camel in the Egyptian desert, pyramids in the distance. The picture, beyond its chuckle factor, creates a distance between the artist (and, along with her, the viewer) and the entire colonial scene that makes up the rest of the work—an oasis-type village with a sand dune for a back lot and dotted with smaller images of the Arab world. These images vary in their "truth" from the apparently documentary to the quite unreal, but the context makes all of them suspect. For Reichek has not invented an artistic persona to participate in the action of the image, or to harmonize its disjunctive parts by providing a center for them to orbit. Where Baumgarten is the hero in a drama of his own devising, Reichek remains firmly planted in the here and now—even in Victorian garb. Her ironic smile breaks up the visual processes of identification be-

tween viewer, subject, and artist.

In an earlier photocollage, *Burden of Dreams*, 1986, Reichek has placed small reproductions of carnival announcements, postcards, movie stills (from *Tarzan*, *The African Queen*, and such), and other images over a photograph of a solar-topeed cameraman filming in a tropical forest—a man recording the kind of images that our culture has used to form our perceptions about such environments. His labor is part of what Kipling called “the White Man’s burden.” Yet the juxtapositions within the work debunk the mythology of colonialism. It is as if we were seeing, in the photographs scattered through the picture, what the white man shot—literally, in the case of the Hemingway type facing down the charging rhino, with moral (and physical) support from his safari rifle. Through the film’s camera we see the images that have been produced to mystify and mythify the non-Western world. The most recent of these images is only a few years old—a poster for *Burden of Dreams*, 1981, Les Blank’s documentary on the making of Werner Herzog’s film *Fitzcarraldo*. In this piece as in other works, the artifacts Reichek uses are the products of our own culture as it observes local societies rather than of the local societies themselves. She does not claim to bring the Other into the gallery. Instead, she unmasks the white man’s view for what it is: a Romanticized and idealized fictive image.

In her installation pieces—most recently *Revenge of the Cocoanuts* (at the 56 Bleeker Gallery) and *Desert Song* (at the Barbara Braathen Gallery, both in New York, in 1988)—Reichek builds upon the images in the photocollages, developing them into all-encompassing environments that accentuate the work’s ironies. *Revenge of the Cocoanuts* takes its cue from the photocollage *Aloha*, 1988, a view of a Solomon Island seascape broken by tondolike smaller photographs: General Douglas MacArthur wading ashore somewhere in the Pacific during World War II; Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins in the soft-porn Pacific-island adventure *The Blue Lagoon*, 1980, bathing their progeny in the womblike waters of the sea; a surfer; the shark called Jaws; a trash-marred shoreline; a group of headhunters; and so forth. No Romantic idylizing of the South Sea island is possible before the sum of these images, in which the waste of industrial society lies on the beaches beside the outrigger canoes. Phantasies of the Pacific are broken up by concrete historical realities and the absurdities of fictional illusion.

Over the past four years or so Reichek has applied her technique of altering appropriated photographs in two groups of three-dimensional works, the “Dwelling” and the “Tierra del Fuego” series. Each of the “Dwelling” series, from 1984–85, begins with an enlarged black and white ethnographic photograph, usually taken in the early 20th century, of a piece of the native architecture traditional to such places as Fiji, East Africa, Lapland, and others. These photographs Reichek has mediated through the hand application of color, from a small slit of burnt orange in the doorway of the Fijian hut to a lush scale of yellows, oranges, and reds covering the roof of the East African dwelling. Next to each photograph is a scale replica of the structure, handknitted in a variety of yarns, the materials of what was once known as “women’s work.” Stretched out, these fabric forms would take the shape of the dwellings in the pictures. Instead, they hang upside down on the wall, like limp parachutes or sacks. Reichek has not supplied them with the supports that would give them architectural rigidity. (In the Lapland piece, birch logs like those in the doorframe of the hut in the picture lean against the wall under the knit bag.)

The manual work Reichek invests in these pieces is of an intimate and personal kind. Knitting, of course, is a common element in the old image of the housewife or homemaker; in a sense, Reichek has returned her art to the role of a woman’s cottage industry. The humanness of the process brings out the coldness and impersonality of the pictures themselves, which, even when people are present (a rare event), are eerily silent and still—or, rather, since silence and stillness are ordinary to photography, are revealed in their ordinary eeriness. The work comments on the objectifying processes of ethnography, of history, of the camera, of science. The effect is underscored by the works’ perspective—the tangible knitted pieces moving out from the wall toward the viewer, the forms in the photographs receding into the flat distance, the fictive picture space, unattainable behind the image surface.



Elaine Reichek, *Gray Man*, 1988, mixed media, 65 x 71". From the “Tierra del Fuego” series.

In these nondimensional regions only silent winds may blow, but nevertheless they are places of existence, into which we may peer to try to perceive a life that once was. The dwellings almost become gravestones, the markers of lost civilizations.

The “Tierra del Fuego” works, 1986–, exert an even stronger spectral presence than the “Dwelling” series. Here Reichek continues the technique of setting original ethnographic photographs—these ones from Martin Gusinde’s early-20th-century studies of the tribes of Tierra del Fuego—next to handknitted replicas of their subjects. Instead of dwellings, though, the photographs show men, in various masks, body paint, or, in one case, a tentlike cloak. Thus Reichek’s knitted shapes here are also all male figures, and they are haunting, even almost threatening presences. Inanimate yet more vital than their twins in the photographs—through the time and handwork in their making, perhaps, as well as their three-dimensionality—they seem ready to jump from the wall into the viewer’s space. At the same time, they seem still a part of the difficult South American environment to which their hardy models had adapted so well. The indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego died off in the early part of this century, the victims of diseases, to which they had no immunity, carried by outsiders who came to the islands for land and for gold, which was discovered there in the 1880s. Reichek’s materializations of the spirits of the aboriginal people, her reinventions of a former existence, are not quite all that we have of them; we have the photographs, and the

scientific books. But instead of pretending objectivity, or striving for it, her knitted forms speak their memorial in clearly personal terms. And they manifest an awareness of loss, and of the ironies involved in acknowledging that loss from within a culture that was complicit in it.

Certainly in their materials and to a certain extent in their process, these series of Reichek's suggest comparison with the work of the West German artist Rosemarie Trockel, whose knitted "paintings" reproduce trademarklike signs of contemporary Western culture. But Trockel abstracts the process of knitting by using a computerized knitting machine, just as her works themselves abstract the artifacts they picture—the Woolmark logo, the Playboy bunny—by reproducing them at least potentially ad infinitum. Part of the point of Trockel's work is to show signs drained of their meaning, signs become hollow shells. Reichek, on the other hand, though similarly involved with the idea of the image as a mediating rather than a strictly representational force, is in a way restoring life to what has lost it. Her knitted works breathe an uncanny presence into the space they inhabit, as if the hand-

made process that created them functioned as a life-giving force. Where Trockel's knitted pieces deal with mechanical reproduction, Reichek is making unique objects, each with a singular personality. Yet she deals with photography as well, and with the contemporary condition of artmaking, refusing the sentimentalizing or monumentalizing of the artist's self implicit in much of the work produced by the last decade's return to painting.

Reichek's work makes substantial what was two-dimensional, imprisoned in the photograph; it generates a rebirth. The painted bodies of the people of Tierra del Fuego, the rude shells of the traditional dwellings, reappear as yarn skins, but not as the trophies of some safari. These are not the embalment wrappings of the ancient preservation ritual or the granite memorials of the Western cemetery. These are vivid, spectral, ghostlike presences that remind us of Other realities far removed from our own, realities brought back to a kind of life; but the rebirth is a melancholy one, for it is necessarily incomplete. □

Charles V. Miller is the managing editor of *Artforum*.



Elaine Reichek, *Burden of Dreams*, 1986, oil on photomontage, 47 x 66". From the "Photomontage" series. Collection of the Prudential Insurance Company of America.