



Installation view of Elaine Reichek's "Transfigurations," 1987; at Carlo Lamagna.

## Elaine Reichek at Carlo Lamagna and A.I.R.

Coinciding as it did with the decline of Neo-Expressionism and the rebirth of Conceptual art, the Primitivism show at MOMA—and the debates it engendered—seemed a swan song to Western art's dalliances with alien cultures. But as it happens, the issues then raised about the now popularly capitalized Other remain relevant to some very tenacious work that both preceded and survived the MOMA event.

Elaine Reichek has been concerned with primitive cultures since the early '80s. A few years ago, she began to knit little replicas of rudimentary South American and African dwellings—an extension of her practice of mimicking a wide variety of architectural forms with Western apparel. In "Transfigurations," as she called her show at Lamagna, greatly enlarged, early 20th-century photographs of Tierra del Fuego Indians were paired with knitted effigies meant to be as congruent as possible with the photographs' subjects. Most of the knitted men are stretched over wire armatures, which mitigates their

evocation of eviscerated skins without eliminating it. These Indians, one of the last Stone-Age tribes, were wiped out within 50 years of their first encounter with white men in the 1880s, largely by imported diseases. At first, the Indians mainly died of smallpox and measles, but later they succumbed to upper respiratory illnesses that evidently resulted from using the clothing the Europeans encouraged them to wear—lethal protection for bodies already adapted to surviving rigorous winters. Yet seeing Reichek's nice, tightly knitted shrouds, we can't help sympathizing with the oppressors: the wool looks so cozy, and the natives in the photographs so exposed, standing alone and often naked amid the rocks and snow.

The curse of contact, the death-dealing bear hug of colonization even in its most benign form, is central to the esthetic of "Transfigurations." The Indians, who were just slightly smaller than is the norm for European men, are shown life-size in stances that are at once aggressive and defensive—fists clenched,

knees locked, chests hollow. Their mostly nude bodies (one is draped to the knees) are painted with stripes, dots and splotches or, in one case, feathered; almost all their faces are masked. In addition to the disguises the Indians devised for themselves, Reichek has applied further body and background paint, in conventionally Western primary colors. Keying up the photos and helping to "define" their contours, this graphic clarification also distorts their meaning.

Similarly, by enlarging to roughly 4-by-6 feet the 8-by-10 inch photos that the Museum of Natural History provided her with, Reichek engages the classic *Blow Up* paradox: the closer you look, the more obscure the image becomes. Details decompose and lose their meaning, threatening the coherence of the whole. Like the addition of paint and the translation of the images into tangible, homespun stuff, this attempt at analysis ultimately alienates its subject.

The melancholy of "Transfigurations" has its complement in "Trouble in Paradise," Reichek's simultaneous exhibi-

tion at A.I.R. A more freewheeling compendium, consisting of modified photographs, knitted shelter forms and variously altered coconuts, "Trouble in Paradise" is more humorous, or at least ironic, and more autobiographical. Bringing in personal photographs and references, it throws into higher relief the feminist concerns that it shares with "Transfigurations." After all, knitting is an activity with a gender, in our culture at least, and its use as a means of representation certainly implies a political choice. The feminine perspective on oppressed and alienated cultures can be called privileged, but Reichek doesn't insist on the prerogative. Instead, she asks us to recognize her subjects' fundamental inaccessibility to our understanding, and their tragic vulnerability to our ignorance. —Nancy Princenthal