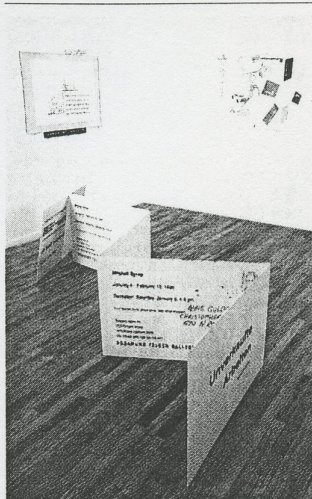


ART

Review

REGULAR, NO SUGAR

In "Hot Coffee," six L.A. artists offer a tasty, mild blend



"Hot Coffee," installation view.

"Hot Coffee," Artists Space, through Mar 15 (see Soho).

Twenty years ago this fall, Artists Space broke new ground with an exhibition curated by Douglas Crimp entitled "Pictures." The show helped launch one of the central strains of the '80s aesthetic: appropriation art. Although the original exhibit included only Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Phillip Smith, the movement soon swelled to accommodate artists as diverse as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons and Thomas Lawson. Now Lawson is closing a circle of sorts by organizing "Hot Coffee," an exhibition (also at Artists Space) of six young L.A. artists who presumably represent the dawning millennium in art.

Originally from Scotland, Lawson made blunt, figurative paintings laced with subtle social commentary back in the '80s. He also wrote. In the October 1981 issue of *Artforum*, he published an amazingly lucid—and still pertinent—essay titled "Last Exit: Painting," in which he argued eloquently for the medium's continued relevance.

Lawson now heads CalArts, the Los Angeles art school founded by Walt Disney, and as it turns out, the artists of "Hot Coffee" (named after a 1937 Edward Weston photograph of a banged-up coffee shop sign in the Mojave Desert) are all recent graduates from there—which is what you might expect. You might also expect that for Lawson at least, there would be some parallels with "Pictures"; indeed, when you examine the cura-

tors' statements for each show, there are remarkable similarities: Crimp writes about the "ambiguities of recognizable images," while Lawson speaks of a "refusal to find closure." Crimp talks about an art "not confined to any particular medium," and Lawson, an art with no "particular allegiance to medium or category." But more intriguing perhaps are the differences: Whereas Crimp claimed that his ideas formed a "predominant sensibility" (which they did), Lawson modestly prefers to "form a puzzle" and "raise interesting questions about aesthetics, spectatorship, class alienation and humor." For this reason alone, "Hot Coffee" and "Pictures" are two very different shows.

At first it seems that there's no "there" here. Things are strewn about: rags on the wall, junk on the floor, a couple of TV monitors. It all fits the Los Angeles stereotype, but if you examine each artist's work carefully, you'll find it thoroughly provocative.

Start with Julie Becker, who makes miniature interiors that look like the homes of people who get busted on *Cops*—barren except for a TV, fake wood paneling, a mattress on the floor, a couple of cheesy pictures and maybe a dresser. She then makes photographs from these models. The result is seedy and fantastical: part docudrama, part psychodrama.

Next is a Naumanesque video projection by Marina Rosenfeld of a figure playing air guitar. Just who this person is (it's unclear if it's a man or a woman) and why he or she is here is left unanswered. The artist suggests, in the title, that it is *The Lingering Afterglow of Repetitive Longing*. I think it's about masturbation. Whatever the case, the piece is mesmerizing.

Laura Owens has only one of her paintings here, but it's a good one. Big and open, it starts out as a perspective diagram, then zooms in to become an uneven wood floor with a couple of puddles spilled on it. It also has a touch of that *Cops* pathos.

Andrea Bowers draws banal pictures of spectators at sporting events. They're interesting as exercises in voyeurism. She also exhibits her source material, a set of videotapes. They make for a nice ambient soundtrack for the whole exhibit, alternating between overcharged crowd noise and bored silence.

Composing loving paeans to his fellow artists, Dave Muller enlarges and alters the announcement cards for their shows. In one piece, he glitterizes photographer Sharon Lockhart's name; in another, he paints the names of T. J. Wilcox and Francis Stark (also young L.A. artists) in pretty colored inks. Finally, Kent Young pieces together different colored squares and rectangles to form a wall painting/ assemblage. It's a haphazard combination that works here, falls apart there. It's an apt analog for this entire light-handed yet edgy show.

Ultimately, this exhibition lacks the manifest destiny of "Pictures" and its focused exploration of a big idea. After all, it's not a "Pictures" kind of moment. As it is, "Hot Coffee" is more like a warm cup of cocoa: quiet and soothing.—*Jerry Saltz*