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Coloring In Lines of Humanity

By PETER PLAGENS

Agnes Denes: Sculptures of the Mind: 1968 to Now

Leslie Tonkonow

535 W. 22nd St., (212) 255-8450

Through Jan. 19



Agnes Denes/Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York

'The Human Argument' by Agnes Denes

Most of the Conceptual artists who burst dryly upon the scene in the 1960s were impure. Their conceptualism was usually joined at the hip to something much more material—wall drawings in the case of Sol LeWitt, veritable word-murals with Lawrence Weiner, and object-photo-text installations with Joseph Kosuth. But the wildly variegated, thoroughly material work of Agnes Denes (b. 1931 in Hungary) makes them all look positively puritanical.

This exhibition coincides with the 30th anniversary of her signature political piece, "Wheatfield—A Confrontation": two acres of wheat planted and harvested on the landfill in Lower Manhattan that resulted from the excavation to construct the World Trade Center. The work—whose point was what Ms. Denes called the "misuse" of land—is recalled in this

show by photographs. A kind of companion piece, "Tree Mountain" (1992-96), a spiral pattern of 11,000 fir trees climbing a man-made mountain in Finland, is present in a schematic drawing and a beautiful photograph.

That's the more intelligible side of Ms. Denes, who also goes in for combining psychology, symbolic logic and even neon in a continuing series of diagrammatic works about improving human interaction called "The Human Argument." This portion of her oeuvre, even her supporters admit, is a bit difficult for someone not schooled in philosophy to parse. Which leads the viewer to ponder a further question: What kind of actual social reform can be effected by arcane art that speaks mostly, if not exclusively, to the art world?

*Scott Patt: Still Here***Winston Wächter**

530 W. 25th St., (212) 255-2718
Through Jan. 19

According to his website bio, Southern California artist Scott Patt (b. 1971) has labored in many fields, among them surfing, missionary work and, most prominently, advertising. Also on his résumé: something he calls "strip club sketch artist."

His exhibition likewise partakes of a variety of ingredients, including [Disney](#) characters (Mickey Mouse rendered in Pollock-like pours of acrylic), Pennsylvania Dutch barn symbols, amalgams of animal and military weapons in silhouettes and bright colors, a repeated bunny sculpture with a prosthetic foot to replace the one presumably sacrificed to our good luck, and—as per the title of the exhibition—the recently discredited Mayan calendar.

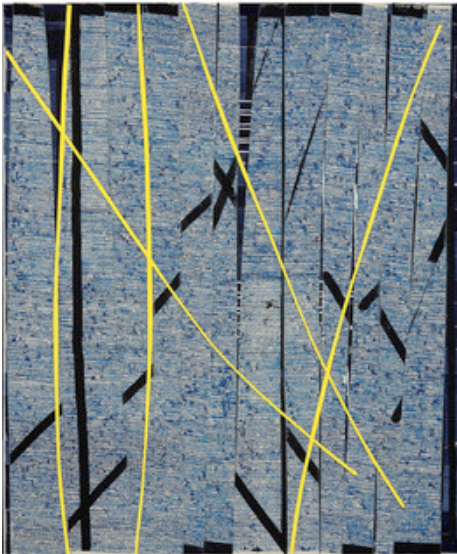
What does it all mean?

According to the gallery, the work in the show amounts to "a shrine to humanity's material and ideological defenses against uncertainty." That's a pretty big rubric, which could well include Social Security, weather satellites and flu shots. (Perhaps Mr. Patt included them, too, and I failed to notice.)

The exhibition is a mess, but given Mr. Patt's technical proficiency in several media and his anything-but-uncertain execution, it's a very attractive one.

*Shaun O'Dell***Susan Inglett Gallery**

522 W. 24th St., (212) 647-9111
Through Feb. 9



Shaun O'Dell/Susan Inglett Gallery

'Shifting Strips' by Shaun O'Dell

Mr. O'Dell (b. 1968) lives and works in San Francisco. He teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, and the California College of the Arts, is also a jazz musician, and describes his working process as "stochastic," or involving chance. These multiple competencies (including verbal adeptness in explaining his work) have produced about 20 identically sized small, neat abstract paintings in the odd media combination of "gouache and ink on paper mounted on canvas mounted on panel."

The paintings—dark and geometric with small bricklike units—are pleasant enough (Mr. O'Dell favors restful blues), but they waver along that line between genuinely obsessive variations on a theme and the mere convenience of near-uniformity. What tilts the verdict in Mr. O'Dell's favor are subtle intricacies in color and a carefully integrated collage element in several pictures.

Nevertheless, his exhibition could have used a surprise or two.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

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