

# ARTS

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M A G A Z I N E

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## MESSAGES

Carlo Lamagna Gallery

By ELLENHANDY

"Messages," curated by Deana Barron, is primarily about the use of words in art by a disparate group of artists, secondarily about the nature of the messages art conveys, and perhaps indirectly about the enormous variety and serious content of work made by eight artists who are all women. Nancy Shaver and Valerie Hammond use language to present messages as texts written within their constructions. Hammond's pieces are Cornelian assemblages but while Cornell's boxes are notoriously oblique in their content, her wall pieces are overt and highly legible. The impact of these works is more in their messages than in their manifestation, perhaps because their borrowed idiom is one that can not be assimilated by other artists. Shaver's

piece, *At Home*, features the simple message "I just want a house, a dog, and a car," augmented by rather quirky elements of mixed media.

Cynthia Kuebel and Jeanne Silverthorne's pieces are considerably more abstract in their preservation of messages. Kuebel's work is abstract in the simple sense of nonrepresentation, whereas Silverthorne's *Says* is only too representational. It is a frighteningly greenish plastic hollow leg, part mold, part prosthesis and part classical fragment. Yet it is finally abstract in that the connection between the leg and the word *says*, spelled out on its edge, is an austere conceptually abstract one. This sculpture is both disagreeable and serious. Its impact is an uncomfortably urgent and visceral one.

Barbara Rosenthal, Nancy Dwyer, and Nancy Spero all make their messages more conversational and evident. Rosenthal's *Homo Futurus* is an exhaustingly large photocopy piece which mixes letters, newspaper clippings, and other materials into a complicated wall of text. Her purpose seems to be to combine mass culture and interior monologue, making commentary only by juxtaposition and presentation. Dwyer does this too, with far greater economy and irony. She has less to say than the other artists in this show, but she says it with unmatched panache. Nancy Spero is committed to taking on great political and cultural issues in her work, in this case a cheerily stenciled piece called *Let the Priests Tremble*, which is about gender differences. Witty and wise, this piece makes it clear that Spero is the "old master" in this exhibition.

However, it is Dottie Attie's piece that steals the show. It is a complex serial presentation of texts, small pictorial fragments, and a larger image (a lithograph) which reconstitutes the frag-

image a detective message carries conviction as Spero's piece does, but it is a message concerned as well with the nature of narrative, of shifting consciousness and perspective, and with the authenticity of experience. It is stylish, intelligent, and passionate, and in addition to having a message, it is about messages.

This show is notable for its undogmatic presentation of work by artists who differ so greatly in philosophy and methods. The work has been chosen and arranged with exceptional sensitivity so that the whole of the show is more than the sum of the works which gain from their intimacy and juxtaposition in the gallery. The idea of art as message, or carrier of message, has not been fashionable for some time, and for that reason this show makes a welcome contribution. It is surprisingly refreshing to consider art as message rather than as interpretation, and all of the works in this show make good sense within this framework. (Carlo Lamagna Gallery, 50 W. 57 St. NY, NY 10019, Dec. 10-Jan. 9)