

Allen Ruppertsberg

at MARGO LEAVIN, 30 March–27 April

Like a child traipsing through a graveyard, Allen Ruppertsberg takes a surprisingly nimble attitude toward death. Although ideas can be just as deadly as sentiment, the conceptual nature of his work assists in an end run on somber emotionalism without ever compromising the subject's severity. It also helps that Ruppertsberg's brand of conceptualism doesn't exclude the presence of real and even lovingly crafted objects. Around their tactile presence, the artist sets his ideas buzzing—buzzing with life, even when the subject is death.

These objects include a full-scale staircase built into one of the galleries and littered with stacks of beautifully fabricated books that viewers are encouraged to handle. This installation, entitled *Low to High* (1994–96), is intimately connected to *Siste Viator*, a project that the artist first realized in Arnhem, Germany in 1993, and one version of which is on display here. Arnhem was the site of a savage battle in World War II that killed an inordinate number of the Polish, Dutch, British, and German soldiers who were involved. Ruppertsberg sets about creating a memorial to them, which is where the books come into play. Each volume exactly replicates the look and feel of a novel that would have been popular with soldiers from the four armies that collided at Arnhem. The originals are reproduced with fidelity to everything from the jacket and bookplate design to the quality of paper and printing techniques used. The only exception is that in many cases one finds blank pages where the text itself should be. What's being suggested is that the battle of Arnhem is available to us only as an historical narrative, which is to say, as a qualified kind of fiction. Historians and art critics have become acutely sensitive to this issue lately, assiduously policing one another's work for the "ideologies" that might color their reconstructions of the past (as though the scholar could be immune to his or her own creative subjectivity). Ruppertsberg subverts the whole discussion by replacing the omniscient view of the historian with the forward-looking consciousness of those who



were actually there, as both the agents of a factual story and the readers of fictional ones.

Even where history, per se, is not an issue, Ruppertsberg finds an intimate connection between mortality and art. In the four *Studies for a Bookmark* (1994), the artist makes painstaking renderings of newspaper obituaries that summarize one's life as a brief narrative. This is the kind of reversal in which Ruppertsberg delights: Verbal art becomes visual, narrative becomes object, past becomes present, original becomes facsimile. Wrapping one term around the other through the conundrums of his art, Ruppertsberg creates a rarefied situation where opposites are indistinguishable. Moreover, the staircase in *Low to High* translates this tension between opposites into yet another of the artist's favorite antipodes: the extraordinary and the mundane. Into each riser are inlaid the alternating words "present" and "absent," a reference to the history and loss which the books stacked on its treads represent. But the structure as a whole also creates its own obverse/inverse relationship since one is free to wander into the space beneath the stairwell, study the exposed joinery, scrutinize the carpenter's notes scrawled there unceremoniously, and discover a few incongruous postcards tacked up as mementos.

Hidden communiqués are also played in *Good Dreams, Bad Dreams, What*

was Sub-Literature? (1996), in which the artist recuperates a variety of other lost languages at the "low" end of cultural production. Professional sign painters—themselves practitioners of a now all but defunct art form—were commissioned to create the numerous colored placards which bear the names (and pseudonyms) of authors and publishers as well as a selection of titles from the "sub-literature" of pulp fiction and the dime-store novel. In a nearby vitrine, the artist includes original examples of the genre from his collection right alongside such highbrow titles as *Bleak House*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Evangeline*, "classics" that were forms of pop fiction in their day.

If this play of opposites drives Ruppertsberg's work, though, it also risks making his undisguised iconoclasm a contradiction in terms: Most anything that sets out to restructure entrenched values through a codified format soon makes of itself another formal value. Then again, it's significant that this very process is reflected in Ruppertsberg's art. In *Love Unafraid* (1985) the title words are carved into the lengths of two logs to just the depth at which the living tissue of the bark meets the dead wood of the interior. Even the boldest statement rests upon the hidden condition of death at its center.

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Allen Ruppertsberg
Love Unafraid, 1985
Two carved logs
27" x 16" x 10"; 48" x 7" x 8"

Allen Ruppertsberg
Study for Bookmark (Jonathan Schenker), 1994
Ink and graphite on paper
29" x 23"