

Handy, Ellen. "Conrad Atkinson."
Arts Magazine (February 1986).

CONRAD ATKINSON

Conrad Atkinson's work is primarily concerned with the content of painting, just as his fellow exhibitor at Ronald Feldman Gallery, Douglas Davis, is concerned with altering perceptions, and the medium of photography, by means of form. The work of one artist is so singlemindedly devoted to content, the other to form, that the juxtaposition is striking. Both seem to be preaching salvation, but by different means.

Atkinson is a very verbal artist. We read, at the entrance to the gallery, his statement: "In this scenario of humor control as reality and illusions that the avant-garde is progressing, it feels more and more that the changes we witness with an illusion of control are real." In addition to the long text from which this excerpt comes, two of the large wall pieces, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, and *Macho Red*

Painting, are accompanied by explanatory wall labels.

The wall labels, quite frankly, are better than the pieces they describe. Most of the works also incorporate texts. Phrases recur: "premaculture, rumor control, the seductiveness of the end of the world." There is an entire series of paintings of TVs and 'ghetto blasters' crudely represented and equipped with controls labeled truth, beauty and poetry, rumor control, and goldfish. Seen as an ensemble, these paintings are weak and repetitive, yet they make interesting points on serious subjects.

There are a few too many themes in the show. The eponymous goldfish are one of the more ephemeral motifs. They are scattered here and there in the paintings, but always seem a little random. They refer to Matisse's irredeemably commodified painting *The Goldfish*. (Matisse's brand of bourgeois modernism is frequently invoked as a manifestation of the enemy.) The best things in the show are two large paintings simulating the front pages of the London *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. They are humor of a very high order. One headline reads "Weinberger Demands More Artists Involvement in Defense Decisions."

This artist's work is likeable overall. In fact, it makes one feel that one would like to attend protest marches for the same causes that Atkinson, no doubt, does, or to talk to him about art, yet it cannot be said that Atkinson's work is compelling in itself. This seems characteristic of a British emphasis on content, occasion and process, as opposed to the formalistic fetishism of the object commodity practiced so assiduously here in America. Atkinson's work is obviously that of a man deeply committed to certain beliefs and issues. It wouldn't convince anyone who disagreed with his views, however. He's only preaching to the converted. Propaganda shouldn't do that, yet propaganda is what this art is evidently trying to be.

Unsuccessful though it may be in this way, Atkinson's work is nonetheless *much* preferable to the vast mass of soulless contemporary art and the trashy, false depths of most neo-expressionism. It's like a breath of politically correct fresh air in the sordidness of the New York art world. (Ronald Feldman, *November 23-December 28*)



Conrad Atkinson,
The Dance of Albion, 1985.
Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 36".