

Loughery, John. "Conrad Atkinson."
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Conrad Atkinson

Ronald Feldman Gallery
31 Mercer St., 212/226-3232

Conrad Atkinson has always been a political artist in the largest and most exuberant sense of the term. This British painter and conceptual artist isn't concerned only with the arms race and the reactionary policies of the Thatcher-Reagan years, though those topics are insistently present in his work. Atkinson is also motivated by the world of art politics, radical chic, consumerism, and media manipulation—all concerns which played a part in his most recent exhibition.

The work here was of four groups: mats, assemblages, monochromatic paintings, and media parodies. Occupying the center of the floor of the largest room were several of Atkinson's "welcome mats," all variations on the theme of the modern death wish. "The Seductiveness of the End of the World, Welcome" proclaims one coir mat (1986-87), rather blatantly suggesting the dark heart of our problem. On a smaller and more droll and elegant level were three of Atkinson's metal constructions under glass which interweave agents of death with elements of dining: a dainty cheese knife and a tiny bomber are welded together, what looks to be a fish on a plate is actually fashioned from military

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hardware. That we have come to find our military superstructures as palatable as our daily bread strikes Atkinson as ironic, but what can be expected from a society where realities necessarily become products and all information is processed via television? The monochromatic paintings, seductive in their layers of all-blue, all-red, or all-green, make that point effectively enough. In each painting, a television screen and a mound of supermarket goodies assume an importance equal to any "living" individuals or graver truths projected on the screen.

The most interesting images in this show were the satirical replications of the print media, whose worth Atkinson seems to question as well. *The Village Voice*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times* (all 1988), among others, are all large, brightly colored versions of the well-known newspapers, both conservative and a bit funkier. But the news they broadcast here is derisively trendy ("Nuclear War: What to Wear," "How to Dress For Third-World Events") or wildly preoccupied with artists and art movements ("Gorbachev To Meet With Abstract Painters"). But how much more meaningful is the verbiage we are awash in every day. Atkinson seems to imply—that litany of political deception, financial humbug, sports mania, and gossip?

There is, of course, a problem with all obsessively political art, a problem that bedevils the work of political artists as different as Sue Coe and Hans Haacke, and that is the tendency of anger to overwhelm visual inventiveness. Earnest social concerns have a distressing capacity for undermining wit, humor, and originality. To judge from the current show, I don't think that has happened yet to Conrad Atkinson, who remains as much fascinated by his art's visual impact and comic edge as by its irascible narrative and political content.

Price range: \$50 to \$10,000.

John Loughery