

'Art Critic Says No to Supreme Court Decision'

BY ELIZABETH HESS

CONRAD ATKINSON: "Front Page." Ronald Feldman, 31 Mercer Street, through February 4.

Conrad Atkinson is a Conceptual artist who makes news, literally and figuratively. In 1972, Atkinson documented a strike in a thermometer factory in Cleator Moor, his hometown in England. The exhibition attracted media attention and became the organizing center for the strikers, who succeeded in negotiating their first union contract. This was one of the most inspiring activist projects undertaken by any artist in the '70s; the artwork was integral to the outcome of the political action. Atkinson went on to cover occupational hazards facing iron ore miners and the conflict in Northern Ireland in a series of single-issue shows. His Marxist line is particularly overt in the current images of hammers and sickles scattered throughout the different works. But he doesn't bludgeon us over the head with his tools. The artist's most effective weapon is his wicked sense of humor.

Atkinson often focuses his shows on topical events, giving his gallery pieces a public component that transcends their private location. His current show is more theoretical, yet it's still an intervention into world events. In a series of paintings and prints he parodies a number of newspapers, not so much to destroy them as to, for the moment, take control of the means of production. Atkinson produces his own news mostly to

ART

entertain, rather than inform, viewers, which is a method also favored by those who control the usual flow of ink. His primary target is the media, and most of his works fall into the now familiar category of deconstruction. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Atkinson doesn't appropriate enemy images, he simply uses them as models to work from.

In 1986, Atkinson did two posters for the London subway system that, at first glance, looked like advertisements for *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*. Two large pieces on paper are based on these subway simulations, and a series of new canvases display the front pages of the *Journal* and *Times* once again, in addition to other papers—including *The Daily News* and *The Village Voice*. The facsimile works are covered with words, while a more abstract group of canvases interspersed among them has only logos. Most of the canvases without "copy" are washed over with a thin layer of paint, with faint lines swirling around their surfaces; as paintings they seem intentionally shallow, but even as Conceptual objects they're empty, at least in comparison to his other works. While texts are usually a burden to most paintings, in this case the pieces that employ them steal the show; witty headlines bump off the "pages" to bring us the art's absurd edition of the news.

Imagine a bunch of dailies, a few articles from *Fortune*, *Elle*, *The Guardian*, *Spy*, and, say, *ARTnews*, all put through a Cuisinart; the result might be something like one of Atkinson's idiosyncratic, yet hardly subtle, tabloids. Columns of wobbly, hand-painted letters are irregu-



Conrad Atkinson:
The Village Voice (1988)

larly illustrated by lopsided graphs, colorful drawings, and surreal ads. The twist here is that politicians and artists are interchangeable, or often they make news together. Aesthetic problems are elevated to the level of pressing national issues; "NANCY REAGAN AND BERTHE MORISOT DISAGREE ON BASIC PRINCIPLES OF COLOUR AND COMPOSITION," reads one headline, demonstrating the need for a clear policy on formalism.

Atkinson imagines a world where artists have "real" power, and he suggests that it just might be a more humane, or, at the very least, more amusing, place to live: "FRA ANGELICO UTTERLY OPPOSED TO STAR WARS/DEFINES THE PLAN AS UNETHICAL, UNWORKABLE, UNGODLY." Vermeer is sent to the Salt Talks and Leonardo da Vinci "HUSTLES N.A.S.A. ON GENERAL PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES." Artists finally have enough clout to be

treated with a respect usually reserved for politicians, but the news remains as deceptive as ever. These pieces do not leap into a rosy future determined by artists; they simply rearrange the leadership and chronicle a series of fictional events that are based on the real ones. Atkinson is not a depressed militant, he's having a good time in these pieces, taking pot shots at friends, enemies, even himself on occasion.

It seems all fun and games, but the back of the book is brought up to the front page because art is serious business. A graph on the pinkish *Financial Times*; *Mondrian* edition charts the "average Pollock yield" as if it were tantamount to a fish harvest; on another canvas a "RISE IN ANDY WARHOL PRICES CAUSES CHAOS AS KOREA LIBERALIZES LAWS." Often the market for the work, rather than the work itself, creates the havoc. Atkinson also shares Hans Haacke's interest in the corporate sponsorship of the arts; high-level discussions orchestrated by IBM executives in the Third World tackle "THE COMPLEXITY OF MEANING IN THE INVERSE FIGURES OF BASELITZ." Art is far from sacred, a fact that doesn't hinder its power in the slightest.

In *The Village Voice*, the bumper headline running across the familiar red flag at the top of the cover is "HOW TO DRESS FOR THIRD WORLD EVENTS." The current infatuation with style, whether in the art or fashion worlds, seems to be Atkinson's pet peeve. "EVERYWHERE TASTE, GOVERNMENT, DESIRE, ART, STYLE, FEAR," reads another *Voice* headline, plugging a story that promises to muddle readers' priorities. In a different painting, a "s STAR GENERAL" reports that "YOU CAN TELL A PERSON'S CHARACTER BY THE WAY THEY DRESS." Central American fashions must not be popular in the Pentagon.

Paintings dominate this show, but Atkinson also includes a number of sculptures and a set of hemp door mats (originally based on advertisements for a British nuclear power plant), lined up in precise sequence on the floor. They appear to be ordinary, mass-produced mats, which gives this piece a material, industrial edge. The word "WELCOME," which appears on each one, becomes a threat rather than a hospitable greeting when topped by Atkinson's apocalyptic blurb: "RESIDUES OF POWER," "STATE OF DE-CAY," "CONSUMING BEAUTY." A large mat at the end of the line displays the message "THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF THE END OF THE WORLD / WELCOME," cynically daring future generations to wipe their feet.