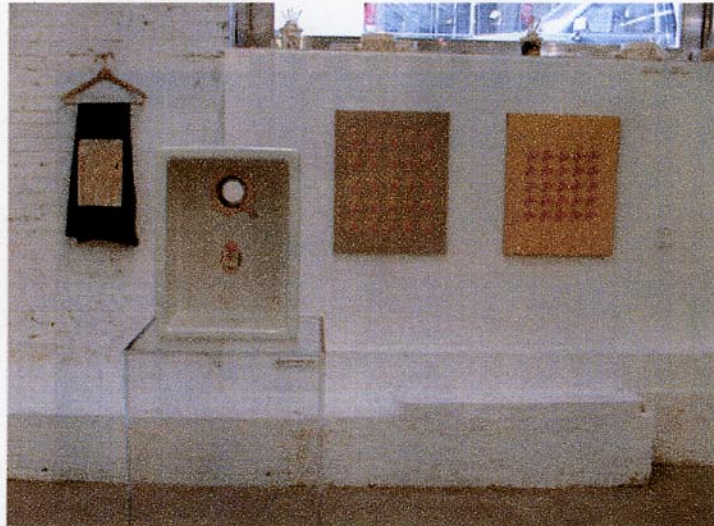


Conrad Atkinson at White Box

A catalogue of bloody wounds constituted the newest phase of this mini-retrospective of Conrad Atkinson's subtle, elusive, politically engaged art. Extracted from the Metropolitan Museum's

and Courtauld Institute's medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Crucifixion and the Pietà, the wound images retain their original identity as signs of Christ's Passion and human suffering while they connect that meaning to the contemporary crisis of AIDS. Although *Metropolitan Wounds* (2003), a large digital print on paper, shows a watery image of blood as resolutely particularized red rivulets that follow creases in the body's skin, this configuration, and others similar to it, is repeated and multiplied, turned into freestanding motifs that operate in several different orders of Atkinson's production, taking on new resonances with new contexts and juxtapositions.

The red wound of Atkinson's gold-painted altarpiece-like canvas, *Jesus* (2002), is the same as a gash embroidered on a Ralph Lauren Polo jacket; it also appears duplicated 25 times in serial fashion on a square canvas. Likewise, the repeated motif of van Gogh's bloody ear serves in one instance as an emblem of the romantic conception that true art is achieved only through anguish and torment; but when embroidered on men's suits, it becomes a sort of logo that suggests the suffering artist as brand. One of these suits, a Kuppenheimer jacket, bears a lengthy, narrative title, part of which reads: *Suit Worn by Manet Whilst Painting A Bar at the Folies-Bergère and Passed on to van Gogh for His Self-Portrait With Bandaged Ear...* The suit displays pink embroidered triangles, devices drawn from the beer bottle label in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*; but when associated with the suit's embroidered splotches of blood, the triangles allude to the emblems worn by homosexuals interred in concentration camps during World War II. The subversive intimations deepen with the recognition that the



Installation view of Conrad Atkinson's exhibition, including, at center, *AIDS Sink with van Gogh's Ear and Golden Residues*, 2002, onglaze transfer and gold luster on ceramic, 16 by 12 by 7½ inches; at White Box. (Review on p. 127.)

classic Kuppenheimer's advertisements were created by the great commercial illustrator of the 1910s and '20s, Joseph Christian Leyendecker, whose covertly homoerotic drawings—calculated to allow both "straight" and "gay" readings—appeared on the covers of *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

In a series of institutional ceramic sinks to which Atkinson has applied, in addition to blutches of blood, imagery such as the Belvedere Torso and a Lucas Cranach vine leaf, we see evocations of high art juxtaposed with plumbing fixtures redolent of the hospital or perhaps the public bathroom. Gold luster is painted onto the porcelain as if it were a fluid pooled around the drain holes. Things get even more unsettling in a series of ceramic sculptures made from casts of land mines, each in the ghastly shape of its model but now "civilized," made decorative, and covered in kitsch imagery, old-master art and patterns of traditional handicraft and design. These delicate tchotchkes assimilate the Victorian production of ceramic transfer-ware with the industrial

manufacture of weapons that continue to kill civilians long after warfare has concluded.

If Atkinson's works often marshal a surfeit of signs that place them firmly within the traffic of contemporary artistic, political and commercial culture, the most powerful works in this show may also have been the most reticent: a series of pages taken from local and international newspapers published just after Sept. 11 on which nearly the whole image of the burning World Trade Center towers is blocked out in brushy, monochrome acrylic. Atkinson has been working with the front pages of newspapers for several decades, but these new pieces leave behind witty political criticism for a deeper expressive statement. Titled the "Obliteration Series," these works suggest both mourning and a kind of stupefaction before such tremendous suffering—ultimately impossible to contain within the ordinary forms of our visual culture.

—Jonathan Gilmore