

The Political Is Provocative

By David Brickman

*Conrad Atkinson:
Constantly Contesting*
OPALKA GALLERY, THROUGH FEB. 29

THERE'S BEEN A SPATE OF DADA-related exhibitions in our area over the last year or two, including work by major historical figures like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, cult favorites such as David Robbins and even local hero Michael Oatman—but nothing in these generally large, sprawling group shows compares to the solo exhibition by British artist Conrad Atkinson now on view in the Opalka Gallery at Sage College of Albany.

Having traveled upriver from New York's White Box gallery, *Conrad Atkinson: Constantly Contesting* is a large sampling of current work by a well-established artist with a strong political bent and a wicked sense of humor. Adept at creating personally affecting objects in a variety of media with seeming ease, Atkinson makes for a very accessible show that is nevertheless cutting-edge.

Nicely spread out in the Opalka's ample spaces, the 50-or-so pieces on display fall roughly into four categories: ceramics, digital prints, embroidered fabrics and mixed media. The works are accompanied by didactic labels—this is after all an art school, and the Opalka does have an educational mission to fulfill—but they are crisply written and informative, as well as being unobtrusive enough that one can enjoy the art unimposed upon by explanations, if desired.

The gallery's atrium introduces the artist with a short biography and just three examples of his work: a large digital print on canvas that resembles an abstract-expressionist painting; a pair of trousers with heavy embroidery hung from a gold-painted hanger; and a tremendous vertical billboard featuring a mock front-page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Immediately beyond this space, visible on the other side of a glass wall, are vitrines containing a number of deceptively lovely cast-porcelain objects (they are, in fact, decorated



Definitely unpretty: an embroidered suit by Conrad Atkinson.

ed replicas of several types of land mine).

Thus, the viewer is immediately introduced to the four areas of creativity that Atkinson pursues, and prepared for the deeper immersion that will follow in the gallery proper. This design worked particularly well for me because, I confess, I'd never seen Atkinson before.

But first impressions are often correct—and the impression created by *The Wall Street Journal Billboard* was of a brilliantly clever but not cynical artist with heart, soul and original ideas. Dated 1986 (among the few pieces in the show not from 2001 or later), the lithographed and handpainted manifesto of sorts contains

wonderfully irreverent pseudo-headlines you wish could have been real. "Rauschenberg and Reagan clash over trade deficit" and "Veronese argues that Brunelleschi design for new Pentagon is prime example of cultural appropriation" are good illustrations of the improbable way Atkinson's art repeatedly sends up, critiques and borrows aspects of art history, politics and postmodern intellectual culture—all at once.

For the most part, the level of quality remains constant throughout the show, and the diversity of materials helps keep it interesting—though it is readily apparent from the several very fine original paintings on newspaper whose digital counterparts are also on display that a lot gets lost in the translation from the immediacy of paint into the latter, more marketable medium.

Appropriately, the embroideries and ceramics are among Atkinson's most recent and most accomplished work; the ceramic land mines in particular, with their stimulating mix of shiny beauty, kitschy sentimentality and dormant violence, show the power of an artist at the top of his game. Equally successful are several of the embroidered suits and trousers, where designer fashion is embellished with tasty color patches that reference Christ's wounds as depicted in artistic masterpieces, as well as the contemporary scourges of AIDS and the West Nile virus.

An oft-repeated mantra on the clothing says "Aesthetics can be a pretty ugly business"—in case anyone should fail to get the message that this artist takes responsibility for his own part in the dilemma. If the work were any more slick, I might take Atkinson to be cynical; instead, I responded to his apparent warmth and energy, and bought his sincerity—a distinctly undadadlike characteristic.

What makes Atkinson still firmly Dada is that he transforms everyday objects by manipulating their presentation—though it isn't exactly pleasant to be reminded of the chilling fact that land mines are everyday objects in far too many places—and he does it with the expected ironic sense of humor. Yet, he is postmodern, too, in the undercurrent of dead earnestness that runs through his work, as well as the light touch that also pervades it.

This subtle sleight-of-hand is part of what makes Atkinson a superior artist: He is neither a slave to fashion (if he were, he'd need to abandon the political messages that are at the heart of his creative output) nor a wild card too out of touch with the mainstream to be relevant.

Instead, he has staked out a piece of turf in the history of art-as-politics with a clear, urgent voice and a lasting message: Have the courage to think for yourself, no matter what.

This fine exhibition is a rare example of the power of art to communicate while maintaining a core of individuality, and a strong argument that it is still possible to be stunningly original while following tradition—as well as fashion. If, like me, you didn't know Atkinson before, you will feel very lucky to have had this chance to discover him here in your own backyard. □