

Art issues.

March / April 1996 number 42

Mitchell Syrop

at ROSAMUND FELSEN, 6 January–10 February

At the entrance to Mitchell Syrop's one-person show, a text reads: GROUP SHOW: CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS, ROBERT WILLIAMS, MEGAN WILLIAMS, SUE WILLIAMS, PAT WARD WILLIAMS. This list of artists' names portends the deceptively simple appearances that follow. The typically transparent apparatus of an art exhibition—signage, price list, and signature work—become oblique tools in Syrop's hands. There is no safety zone from his biting humor: Syrop acts as a double-agent working from within the established codes of his career. Although the viewer may appear the brunt of the joke, the effect cuts both ways. Syrop's cynicism is not ironic; his ego lies at its giddy vortex.

Disparate art movements mix in the shifting voices of this exhibition. In one gallery, three paragraphs of text are printed on the wall with language reminiscent of early conceptual art. In *Sensibility/Affect* (1996), Syrop presents a capitalist conundrum. It reads: A ZEN-LIKE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS quality about THESE WORKS invokes MANY OF THE VALUES OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM. Syrop compresses the dichotomy between abstract expressionism and conceptual art, both of which have been neutralized by the market and history. The self-referential wit of conceptual art is also present in *Fish* (1996), in which white letters optically vibrate against a black ground. The text describes a construction of vinyl sheeting, and the hyperbolically serious tone of the work, as well as the hallucinogenic quality of the description, earnestly skews the voice of its stylistic forerunners. Syrop humorously overlays the era of early conceptualism and recent art, contrasting the philosophical and political aspirations of both.

Viewing the exhibition's central display of *Unverkaufte Arbeiten* (*Unsold Works*), curtained off by bubble-wrap in the back gallery, is like watching someone

else's family skeleton fall out of the closet. This intimate display of widely exhibited art overstock is a mirror image of the back rooms of public collections (where, in contrast, previously sold work is stored). Here, viewers are encouraged to flip through stacks of framed and unframed work. The work is chosen by reverse natural selection: leftovers from Syrop's series of posters mounted in board with words torn out such as *Brush Stroke* (1988) and *Learning Disability* (1990); the 1986 series "In the Can," for which images of germs are combined with logos such as "To Have and to Hold" and "Assume the Position"; stacks of boxes, including thousands of the enlarged high-school yearbook photos used for an epic body of work that Syrop has been developing since 1974.

Small constellations from this latter project are hung tightly on the back wall. Just as Syrop organizes the faces by their stylistic and anatomical characteristics, he also creates a framework for viewing all of his art, which turns the value of an individual work on its head. If cost equals value, and success equals marketability, how do we factor in the industries that flourish on the production of art whether sold or unsold (framing, storage, packing, and shipping)? Demystifying the gray areas of the art business, Syrop's retrospect infects our per-

spective on daily art experiences.

The confusion generated by looking at the disparate sections of this exhibition is crystallized in its authoritative checklist, on which eighty-nine works are described (not counting the multi-pack items). The aloof "Not for Sale" is listed for each of the text pieces, in contrast to the sardonic "Make an Offer" listed for each of the unsold works. Both price strategies tweak exchange value through the inflation and deflation that is inherent in supply and demand. Instead of the fixed prices we usually discover in the commercial marketplace, all of the unsold work is up for bidding. Syrop challenges the viewer to step into the arena of negotiation, but his elaborate emphasis on the commodification of the work has the reverse effect, transforming the exhibition into a network of abstract ideas.

Opening a Pandora's box of value-indicators—brand name, price tag, historical significance—Syrop initiates questions about what his art, and the tools by which we judge it, are worth. Placed by the door leading to *Unverkaufte Arbeiten* (*Unsold Work*), a large tube is left packed and labeled "Sit in Judgment," offering us a seat on this precarious throne.

Ingrid Calame is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles.

Mitchell Syrop
Unverkaufte Arbeiten, 1995
Installation view
Photo: Anthony Cuñha

