

LINDA KIRKLAND GALLERY

Nancy Davenport and Ann Burke Daly

LINDA KIRKLAND GALLERY, NEW YORK
OCTOBER 19 TO NOVEMBER 24, 1996

Elements of fiction and a storytelling flair fuel the reality-bending aesthetic of both artists in this intriguing exhibition. Filled with towering cliffs, heaped up clouds, vertigo-inducing valleys, and stunning vistas stretching way off into the distance, the elegant silver-print nature photographs in Nancy Davenport's 1996 Accident Prone series evoke the romantic paintings of Caspar David

roughly mixed up with all sorts of fictive additions, although the captions maintain a deadpan aura of "truth." In *Leo Bloom*, for instance, the caption concerns a person who, "was the survivor of the greatest number of motor-vehicle accidents ever surveyed," who nevertheless developed "an unreasonably high degree of optimism" and who went on to "become a successful motivation speaker." Ultimately, he died, "from head injuries sustained on Mt Bialystock," the precise accident that the photograph pretends to record.

You can't trust these ultra-realistic photographs at all as records of reality, nor can you believe the accompanying captions. Yet what Davenport, with her quietly absurdist dissembling, is really

getting at is a sense of life in which accidents, wildcards and psychological frailty undercut the grand sweep of the heroic. A romantically tinged view of nature with art-historical connotations gets a weird cartoonish twist. While Davenport's photographs are gorgeous, they're also impishly lethal – a fairly idiosyncratic combination.

Ann Burke Daly's exotically titled installation "The Automaton Olympia's Cabinet of Curiosities" was excerpted from an ongoing project that centers on the robotic character of Olympia in "The Sandman," a short story by

the German romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann. In four related works, we see Olympia's own things – the fictive possessions of a fictive character (and not just any character, but a proto-robot who had no life at all) suddenly emerging into the "real." In *Sometimes Olympia Has Trouble Concentrating and Gift (from you, you, you)*, dozens of yellowish wax flowers, each stuck with a pin, cover most of a wall. More wax flowers adhere to a white desk and chair, various books on the floor, and the floor itself. You get a queasy feeling of Victorian floral decoration gone completely amok. There is an obsessive spookiness in the

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way these strange flowers mysteriously signify the complicated inner life of someone absent and ungraspable.

In Daly's world, Olympia constantly shuttles between roles: While this tableau indicates studying or writing, *The Collector's Notes* – a series of seemingly aged photographs on the wall documenting lists of jewelry – suggests that Olympia is also a "collector." These contemporary Polaroid could not possibly have existed in Olympia's 19th-century milieu. And you wonder why an automaton should assume such a role. Sometimes, with Daly's work, you want to forget about the whole overarching conceit – Olympia, Hoffmann, the 19th century – in order to perceive, somewhat in

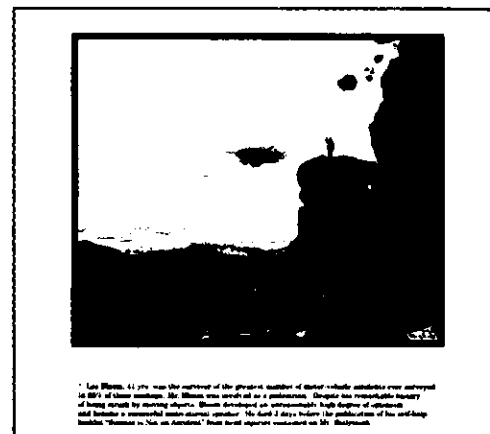


ANN BURKE DALY: *Sometimes Olympia Has Trouble Concentrating and Gift (from you, you, you)*, 1996, installation, wax, pins, desk, chair/books, inscription, size variable.

Friedrich and, perhaps even more so, the 19th-century American Hudson River School painters.

But Davenport's nature shots come with a surprising, darkly humorous twist: Each concerns an impending deadly mishap – generated on the computer by seamlessly factoring in a different photograph altogether. In *Leo Bloom*, a tiny figure standing on a cliff's ledge blissfully surveys the surrounding locale, unaware of a small avalanche of boulders about to annihilate him. In *Georgina Grayson*, a woman about to enter a tunnel finds two bears – photographed from a diorama at New York's Museum of Natural History – guarding the entrance, given new life as death-dealing sentries.

Below the images, short biographical captions purport to tell something about the person whose imminent tragedy we are witnessing. Here, shreds of what might be factual information get thor-



Leo Bloom, 41 yrs was the survivor of the greatest number of motor-vehicle accidents ever surveyed in NY's 4000 counties. Mr. Bloom was used as a politician. Despite his remarkable history of being struck by moving objects, Bloom developed an unreasonably high degree of optimism and became a successful motivational speaker. He died 2 days before the publication of this self-help book, "Bloom's 41 yrs on steroids," that first appeared mentioned on Mr. Bloom's tombstone.

NANCY DAVENPORT: *Leo Bloom*, 1996, silver print, 16 x 20 in., from the Accident Prone series.

recently, the work at hand. Particularly compelling was a series of small, austere, yet strangely elegant pencil drawings on tracing paper, *Building Drawings for a Machine for Electroplating the Dead*, quasi-scientific studies of odd contraptions that seemed simultaneously utilitarian and bizarre.

Daly's art is crammed with ideas – about presence and absence, the impermanence of social roles and shifting identities, historicity, verity and fiction. One other thing of interest: If you take the E.T.A. Hoffmann story seriously as a source, you might find that Daly is a lot closer to the figure Nathaniel than to Olympia herself. It's Nathaniel, after all, who falls in love with this lifeless automaton; who projects upon her (or rather, upon it) his obsessions, concerns and intellectual interests (and becomes completely unhinged in the process). In this updated take on the story, Olympia is a blank slate again, but this time, for the artist's own late-20th-century intellectual concerns.

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