

American Fine Arts, Co. presents an exhibition of works of art by J. St. Bernard.

Central to the exhibition are those controversial sculptures exhibited, though not necessarily produced, in the first half of the 1990s. Consisting of such elements as galvanized metal electrical conduit boxes which recall in their dimensions and production technique the work of Don Judd but perfectly laminated with appropriated photographic imagery in a strategy more akin to Pop; and fetishistically smooth resin sculptures of dog bones, St. Bernard's work was described at the time as a "frigid blizzard of [a] feeble intellectual joke."¹ Such responses were not uncommon in the New York art world the first time it stepped across St. Bernard's artistic output. As another relatively sympathetic theoretical observer, the great art historian Joshua Decter, put it at the time, St. Bernard's "oddly supercilious instance of post-historical/neo-Dadaist attitudinizing"² was perceived primarily as "an attempt to poke fun" at an art world at that time besieged by a monster of its own creation. The spectacle of young artists embroiled in Oedipal struggle with the artistic paradigms which had come to signify the very last authentic avant-garde squeezed in by history before the dominance of the commercial art world over critical dissemination was taken to be the target of St. Bernard's ambivalence.

If things look differently to us now, it may be at least in part because with the continued expansion of the Oedipal struggle for dominance and its concomitant erasure of another kind of organizational principle of art as a contribution to the field of epistemology—to the degree that the last bastion of scholarship, the museum, has itself long ago succumbed—we may see fidelity rather than irony in St. Bernard's cries of warning. The initial reception of St. Bernard's work is perhaps a case of accusing the tail of wagging the dog. Instead of a ravaging criticism directed against the young artists in whose company St. Bernard was only ever seen, his bite was firmly and joyously clenched on the fleshy hind parts of the institutional structures whose collusion with the market kept St. Bernard leashed outside of the arenas of privilege, like a modern day Diogenes, where he was happiest.

1. Levin, Kim. The Village Voice, May 8, 1990.

2. Decter, Josh. Flashart, October 1990.