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The New York Times
nytimes.com

October 1, 1999

ART IN REVIEW; Jim Nutt -- 'Portraits'

By ROBERTA SMITH

Nolan/Eckman Gallery
560 Broadway, near Prince Street
SoHo
Through Oct. 23

It's not too early in the season to place this show, dominated by Jim Nutt's impeccably chiseled, feather-light portrait drawings from the 1990's, on a list of the season's best. Mr. Nutt, who turned 60 last year, is the leader of the Hairy Who or Chicago Imagists. He is also one of the most original, if least appreciated, artists of a generation born in the late 1930's that includes such lights as Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, Lucas Samaras, Sigmar Polke and Frank Stella. In addition Mr. Nutt is working at the height of his powers.

Ranging from 1974 to the present, the show's 22 drawings reflect an expanding maturity and mastery, and a consummate synthesizing of inspirations ranging from Hieronymus Bosch and Northern Renaissance portraiture to underground cartoons, the tightly styled movies of Douglas Sirk, and outsider artists like Joseph Yoakum and the great Martin Ramirez. Mr. Nutt more or less saved Ramirez's work for posterity, coming across this Mexican artist's large collage-drawings in 1968 at Sacramento State College, where they were being used as teaching aids by a doctor who had worked at the mental hospital where Ramirez lived from the mid-1930's until his death in 1960.

In the earliest drawings the human (read sexual) comedy is enacted by antic malformed men and women on proscenium stages. Violence and nastiness are everywhere, held in check by exquisite graphic control. Some, like "There Are Reasons," are done in colored pencil that has the richness of pastel. Others, in graphite, are full of contrasting lines and textures; tightly wound figures depicted in a harsh stop-start, somewhat hairy line cavort on floorboards textured with minute, ineffably soft curls of spiraling lines.

In "i.e.," a transitional work from 1987, Mr. Nutt depicts a large female head behind which a sniveling male proffers a bottle of perfume. By the next year it's time for tightly framed close-ups. The women are on their own, powerful and complete, with unruffled surfaces and level gazes.

The head, often rising from mesalike shoulders, is reinterpreted as a stage unto itself on which every feature is a separate character. Noses tend to be monumental carapaces, coiffures can suggest eccentric topiary, and ears evoke Chinese scholars' rocks, while eyes and brows tilt this way and that like uncooperative fish.

Anything can be singled out for enjoyment; the arc of a collar, the repeating curves of eyebrow hairs, the dangle of a corkscrew curl, whiffs of erased lines or patches of shadowy hatching.

This disparateness is reflected in the way these works are mined with references to other art: Picasso's two-eyed profiles, Ghirlandaio's bulbous noses, Gorky's round-formed yet resolutely linear portraits. There are contemporary asides as well. In "Drawing for Tussel," for example, the contrasting textures of smock, hair and background may represent a combined assault on Jasper Johns's cross-hatches, Mr. Stella's swooping shapes and Sol LeWitt's grids.

But in the end the drawings' constituent parts resolve themselves into a face and personality that possess an almost photographic coherence.

Similarly, Mr. Nutt's sources and references are distilled into a style that is singularly his own and the source of some of the greatest drawings of the moment.

ROBERTA SMITH
