

APRIL 1999
\$4.75 CANADA \$6.75

NEW | ART

EXAMINER

Helen Mirra

Chicago Project Room
1464 N. Milwaukee Ave., 60622
773/862-9209

Some artwork takes you directly out into the world, as if the artist were a neutral vehicle through which ideas coursed. As with documentary realism or overt didactics content takes over and we can almost bypass thinking about the artist altogether. On the opposite end of the spectrum lies work that despite obvious worldly content directs you back to the artist, to the conceptual, aesthetic decision-making processes of a particular sensibility. Most work falls somewhere in between, enacting or encouraging a balancing of subjective and objective meanings. I found Helen Mirra's show to consistently lead me back to the artist.

On the surface, what the show is "about" is mapping, traveling, and confronting a natural environment that is opaque until humanized. Two long, thin parallel bands of cotton fabric mark, to scale, the bodies of land and water encountered if traveling around the globe in a perfect circle; one represents a trip around the 52-degree parallel, the other across the tropic of cancer. The alternating green and blue patterns stretch out over 360 inches. In *A Map...*, another trajectory has been painted on 16-millimeter film. In *Rounding*

Cape Horn, a light-blue sewn thread traces the invisible coastline of the title, set against a background painted a deeper blue. A series of Minimalist drawings, each titled after particular latitude and longitude points, hints at significant encounters with specific places, but all that remains are the creases of a map-like folding and one or two words—"hold," "belay"—marking the broad sheets of green and blue. Among other objects on display were *Portable Deck*, a corduroy and wool tarp hitched close to the ground; *Sidewalk Cover*, a 40-foot-long, dyed-cotton covering for a common poured cement walkway; and *Garanimals*, a complete collection of the artists' clothing worn from 1988 to 1998 arranged in a chromatic spread of browns, greens, and blues.

Minimalism here is butted up against a romantic expansiveness: Mirra travels the seven seas, high captain of her imaginary journeys, but stylishly undercuts the fantasy by using a reductive vernacular. Any potential excess that would probably make us cringe or think the artist naïve is tempered with a coolness that allows us an escape from the sentiment; the work constantly navigates a fine line between opposites. The literal coolness of color contrasts with the heat of the referenced equator. The all-encompassing gesture of modifying her wardrobe for an entire

decade to make *Garanimals* compares to the poverty and poorness of the clothes themselves, now worn and ratty. The absurd wish to protect the sidewalk with a special covering contrasts with the inappropriateness of the material used, which is neither waterproof nor durable. The generosity of sharing sites Mirra deems significant, and her private word associations, compares to a hermetic quality of the presentation that resists inclusion. The openhandedness of the exhibition—the project room was unusually packed full, and Mirra even displayed some of her own working notes—contrasted with the latency of some of the pieces. A stack of self-produced vinyl records in one corner, still and dormant, was waiting to be animated at some other place and time.

Again and again, an impulse toward indulgence and exuberance—traveling the world, searching for meaning, engaging a silent universe, romancing the imagination—is juxtaposed to a sophisticated, even cynical Minimalism that abates false hope. In the midst of all of these contrasts, the work pushes back to the behavior of the artist, that Mirra has found a way to make work that is both wishful and cautious.

Jan Estep is an artist and Associate Editor of New Art Examiner.

45
new art examiner april 1999



Helen Mirra
"Map, Film, Record,
Picture, Sculpture"
installation view. Front:
Garanimals, 1999;
complete wardrobe,
12" x 12" x 120"; and back
right: *Portable Deck*, 1999;
corduroy, wool, grommets,
120" x 120". Courtesy of
Chicago Project Room.