

Review/Art

The Joys of Childhood Re-examined

By HOLLAND COTTER

Sometimes the Drawing Center's twice-a-year showcase of younger and underknown artists has a real cohesive impact, and "Selections Spring '94" is such an occasion. Work for work, it's one of the liveliest offerings in a slow month in SoHo, though not one recommended for the faint-hearted. Enough to say that the children are probably safer checking out Lucian Freud's beached, PG-rated nudes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art than some of the audacious cartoon-style material here.

The show's subtitle, "The Sick Rose," is lifted from William Blake's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" (1789) and goes right to the heart of ideas underlying not only this exhibition, but also a good amount of the art of this decade.

Blake uses the image of a flower attacked by a worm as a symbol for childhood — sensuous, trusting and optimistic — tainted by adult repression, and this hard drop from bliss to disillusionment is the implicit theme of contemporary work as diverse as Mike Kelley's dolls, Robert Gober's torturous playpens, and the sexually fraught "Bad Baby" paintings of Lisa Yuskavage. The big difference is that in place of Blake's exhortatory-moral tone, new art often offers absurdist humor and the resigned conviction that experience is an unavoidable, dead-end option.

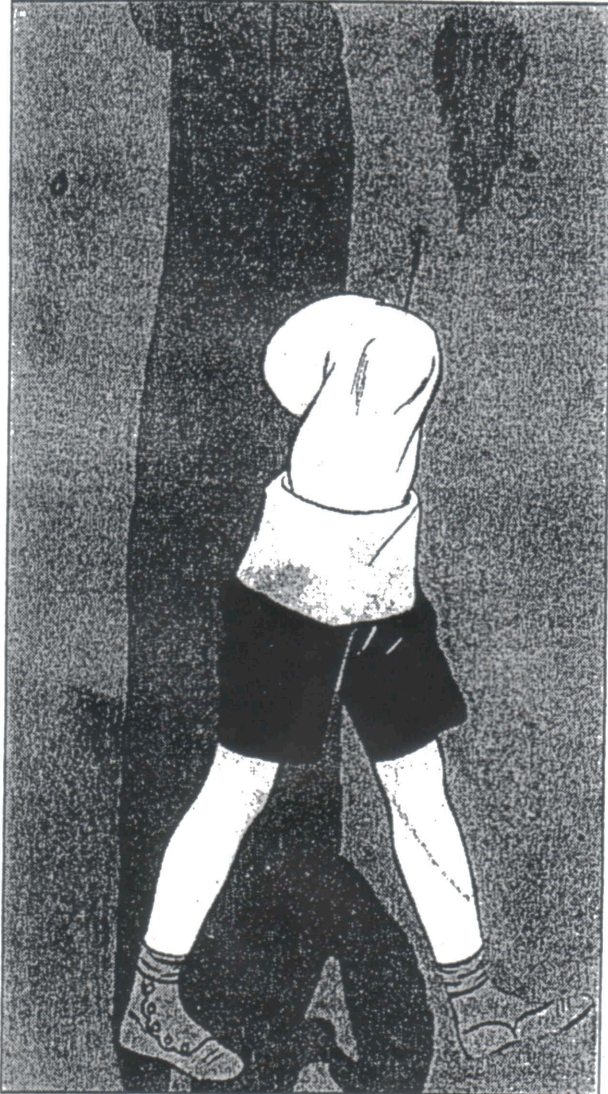
Of the five young artists at the Drawing Center, Arturo Herrera's 20 small painted collages, collectively titled "Desire," are the least confrontational, although in them innocence is already pretty clearly on the skids. Mr. Herrera splices together bits of cartoon figures to create bizarre hybrids: a child wearing shorts turns into a single phallic-looking bare knee from the waist up; Walt Disney's Snow White thrusts her arm down the neck of a huge decapitated cat. The collages look like kindergarten exercises that have veered seriously out of control. Polymorphously perverse and sweet, they seem to come from the hand of a child still too naïve to disguise the depths of his own aggression.

Aggression against the inner child is the obsessive subject of Judy Glantzman's ink-and-pencil drawings. With their huge heads and party hats, her figures look like overgrown infants, although many have the sexual characteristics of adults and seem to be engaged in masturbatory activities. Their faces register a haunted, wide-eyed stare, which sometimes opens out into a scream.

Five artists' images of innocence tainted by experience.

Ms. Glantzman's use of frequent erasure and overdrawing makes the children's limbs appear to vibrate, as if they are physically reacting to extreme psychic discomfort.

Yael Kanarek also does peculiar things with bodies in her gouaches, although her subjects are adult women. Nude and painted in shades of gray, they are surrounded by household items that have taken on lives of their own: teapots that pour themselves, cups that spin in midair. Even



Becket Logan/Drawing Center

A detail from "Desire," a series of 20 painted collages by Arturo Herrera on exhibit in "Selections Spring '94," at the Drawing Center.

behind them like billowing capes.

Kevin Bolyard's work is about transformation wished for, rather than achieved. His recurrent images are of sheep and lambs drawn in blue chalk. (Shades of Blake's "Little Lamb, who made thee?" Or of sacrificial victims led to slaughter?) The images are accompanied by penciled instructions for self-improvement. "Examine yourself regularly," one crabbed little directive reads. "Be more creative, wear feather wigs and eyeglasses to detract from your bruises, act smart." Mr. Bolyard's notes neatly capture the spirit of a familiar "do something, do anything" loserdom, for which the words innocent and pathetic are practically interchangeable descriptions.

The show's high point belongs to Keith Mayerson, who brings innocence and experience together in a hilarious, phantasmagoric series of 46 ink-and-watercolor drawings that recast the tale of the puppet Pinocchio as a picaresque journey of growing up homosexual in a homophobic society. Much of the narrative looks like a pornographic, head-comics version of children's book illustrations; Gepetto is now a John Wayne butch type, and Pinocchio's fabled extended

ny in its political implications. (Jesse Helms as a Tenniel-style Queen of Hearts is no surprise, although Bill Clinton's appearance as a dopey-looking baby-faced courtier is.) And the tale's conclusion is ambivalent, to say the least. The final scene, in which Pinocchio finds true love, looks like just one more lurid episode in a sadistic, relentlessly bizarre world and hardly a happy ending.

What Blake, that vehement old libertarian, would have made of all this is anybody's guess. He probably would have liked its spirit, although the bummed-out, childhood-perverted vision that has gained currency at the end of this century isn't really his style. In his own work he envisioned a goal that went beyond both innocence and experience to something else, a kind of a return to paradise, but with street smarts. Nothing in the Drawing Center's stimulating show suggests that state, but just on the principle that you have to be where you are to get where you want to go, the work here may be a lot more optimistic than it initially appears.

"Selections Spring '94" remains at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo, through Thursday.