NEW WORK
NEW WORK: A NEW GENERATION
FEBRUARY 22 - APRIL 22, 1990
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART

NAYLAND BLAKE
JIM COLARUSSO
TIM EBNER
GÜNTER FÖRG
KATHARINA FRITSCH
ROBERT GOBER
GEORG HEROLD
ALFREDO JAAR
JEFF KOONS
CADY NOLAND
THOMAS RUFF
KAREN SYLVESTER
CHRISTOPHER WOOL
Michele ZALOPANY
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How long are generations today? In contemporary art things change so quickly that one is tempted to adapt Andy Warhol’s defmition and answer about fifteen minutes. These days most of us tend to think in decades—the fifties, the eighties—rather than the twenty-five year periods that were traditionally considered the units of intellectual and cultural development. The new generation of artists put forth in this exhibition has developed in an even shorter time: five years ago most of them were entirely unknown. Five years from today they will no doubt be seen as old, or at least aging, masters; and another “new generation” will have taken their place. One might conclude from this and not without reason, that a hunger for the new that can at times be almost ravenous has taken over the field of contemporary art.

Yet something really has changed. Five years ago, in 1985, the strongest new art being made in this country was the work of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Elizabeth Murray, Susan Rothenberg, and Eric Fischl, to name only a few. These artists remain vital and respected figures, of course, and in fact all of them are by now well known; each one having had an exhibition that circulated to major museums around the country. Among the most important differences between these artists’ work and what is included in this exhibition is that they are painters, and most of the younger figures are not. But the differences go deeper. While the artists of 1985, to coin a generational tag, tended to be emotional, personal, and biographical; those of 1990 are distant, impersonal, and conceptual. Instead of exploring their own lives, they often focus on social and cultural issues, and their artistic ancestors are not the abstract expressionists, as they clearly were for Julian Schnabel, but Andy Warhol and Bruce Nauman, among the American artists, and Joseph Beuys, among the Europeans.

In what we might call the generation of 1990, Christopher Wool perhaps demonstrates most clearly some of the connections with what went before, as well as some changes in direction. For one thing, he paints. Yet to compare his work with his predecessors would seem almost like a coda to the illustrious history of an art form. Fing makes his paintings to serve as part of an installation, and he tends to speak of them in terms of architecture. Even though they are meant to stand alone as well, when they do they often seem to be despairing homages to painting’s past rather than the occupiers of new ground. In the painting included here, Fing has chosen to work in a single color; the particularly revolting light green that, until a few years ago, was universally used for the walls of elementary school classrooms and hallways. Using it to cover a large, almost sculptural sheet of molded lead, Fing has left the top and left margins blank, allowing the metal to show through and creating a pattern that suggests...
the geometric abstraction of the early twentieth-century art of Mondrian, perhaps, or Malevich. The resultant composition, however, is absurdly unbalanced, and the pigment is applied so thinly as to suggest a wall in need of another coat of paint. In works such as these, För clearly invokes the idea of world of early modernism, only to suggest its demise.

In his photographs, which play a role in his work quite analogous to that of his paintings, both in size and in function, För's evocation of modernism as a ghostly presence is even more clear. Whether it is the family absurd, slightly run-down grandeur of Alcudia Llibre's Villa Malaparte, the curiously voidless simulacrum of Pius van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion that was recently reconstructed in Spain, or as here, the beautiful emptiness of Ludwig Wittgenstein's villa in Vienna, his subject is always modernist architecture as a dream that failed because they are so large in scale, the photographs seem almost to invite the viewer to step through their frame, as if over a threshold. Yet the world they present is notably blank and airless, an image of perfection rather than a place in which one might actually exist.

Something similar to För's nostalgic farewell to modernism is present in Jim Colarusso's glowing stainless steel squares with small photographic images of well-known modern paintings at their centers. For the two works shown here, the artist photographed details of Jackson Pollock's One Number 31 (1950), at the Museum of Modern Art, and Jasper Johns's Three Flags (1958), at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Their images are dark and hard to read, especially against the reflective steel surface that surrounds them, which makes them seem to recede into space like the dark at the end of a tunnel. It is as if Colarusso was bidding a long goodbye to the art of painting.

The crisis that Wool, För, and Colarusso allude to is made explicit in the work of Georg Herold. For him, clearly, the possibility of painting has become something of a joke, albeit a very serious one. Although Herold makes works of art on canvas, he rarely uses them, covering them instead with non-art materials from real life. His brick painting included here is just that—bricks attached to a canvas. Although its rectangular solid forms perhaps allude to the tradition of geometric abstraction, the bricks themselves project from the canvas in a diagonal line, raising the possibility of an actual function, as if they were stairs. Recalling Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase (1912), Herold has made bricks descending a canvas. His caviar paintings are equally witty. Accepting the role of the artist in the marketplace as part of his subject matter, Herold smears grams of caviar across a canvas, and in the process produces work that is outrageously and subversively, while also being a beautiful homage to the paintings of one of Herold's mentors, Sigmar Polke.

Cady Noland's art is made from materials that are even more ordinary than those of Georg Herold, and in using them, she transforms them even less. Often assembled from empty cans of Budweiser, bits of foil, white, and blue bunting of the sort that decorates used car lots, and odd, useless segments of stainless steel pipes, Noland's work seems not so much formed or even assembled as gathered and left. Detritus that is curiously clean, it both promises and refuses to tell its history, revealing in the end no clue as to how it got there. One looks in vain for the epiphanies of a Joseph Cornell, finding instead what seems barely distinguishable from chaos. Yet clearly a process of selection is at work, and no matter how seemingly haphazard, deliberate arrangement and even construction has taken place. The denial of artistic creation in the traditional sense, however, is evident at the forefront of the work. Entropy constantly threatens to overwhelm whatever fragile order exists, the creation of despair, perhaps, as much as will. Helplessly one thinks of T.S. Eliot's line, "These fragments I have shored up against my ruin."

Naylor Blake also makes his work from the ingredients of everyday life. His Device for the Enhancement of Articidon exactly that, with what seem to be the most ordinary materials. Blake has constructed a sort of allegory of art, sitting quite purposefully on a shining stainless steel shelf, a light box portentously but pointedly illuminates the plastic leaves of an artificial fern, while next to it, what seems to be a cabbage turns out, upon closer inspection, to be made of quite incredible silk. These elements form part of a carefully balanced and composed still life, a painting, in effect, that seems poised to deliver three-dimensional, real reality, but is actually even more artificial and unreal than the allusions to the subject matter of traditional painting that it contains. The work as a whole is an elegant and beautiful machine that denies every expectation it promises. Art, in this case, seems to take on the role of the forever-frustrated bachelors of Duchamp's Large Glass.

Like Herold, Tim Ebner produces simulations of paintings. The works included here are made from vacuum-formed acrylic, a technique akin to the process used to produce surfboards. Because of varying colors in the plastics the artist selects, his works have a pattern something like the tumultuous surfaces of marbled wood. Like Herold, Ebner wittily undermines the expectations of his viewers: what seems to be a laboriously painted surface is in fact a manufactured object. Because of the hard, plastic nature of Ebner's "paintings," bracingly contradicts their association with what might be called the pop sublime.

Katharina Fritsch translates the banal into the hallucinatory. In Table Society, her largest work to date, thirty-two identical figures sit at a table covered with a red and white patterned tablecloth. Because they are so manifestly ordinary, we believe in their reality, but our view down the table seems endless, and we are left with the feeling of having encountered something highly disturbing, yet distressingly everyday. Her Ghost and Flaw of Blood forms part of the same body of work, inspired in part by horror movies. Like the tablecloth in Table Society, the diminutive white figure seems familiar and almost reassuring. It is all the more shocking, then, to encounter a pool of what appears to be real blood beside it, and we are faced again with something both resonant and disturbing, and something that in our waking hours we have never encountered before.

Like Fritsch, Michele Zalopany deals with the subtleties of nightmare reality. Her Bedroom is an ordinary image of a type that was frequently encountered in popular magazines several decades ago. Although familiar at the four- or five-inch scale of illustration, at the seven-by-ten-foot size of Zalopany's work, we encounter it in entirely different terms. Enlarged, it becomes credible and real, but the actuality of the scene, a room that clearly was created to satisfy the excessive demands of fantasy in the 1950s, takes on an aspect of dementia.

In his recent work, Jeff Koons, too, enormously enlarges and in so doing transforms his sources. Since we immediately understand that they are based on the kitsch images
of greeting cards or souvenir store chotchkes. Koons' longer-than-life sculptures at first seem familiar, and our initial impulse is to laugh. Almost immediately, however, our laughter is stifled because somehow, in enlarging these images, a highly distressing element of psychotic reality has emerged from them. What seemed cute and reassuring on a small scale becomes threatening when encountered larger than life, and the content of the work often takes on the feel of an either dream or a nightmare. In String of Puppies, an enormous, smiling man (who looks, probably by accident, remarkably like Willem de Kooning) and his equally enormous, androgynous mate hold up eight blue puppies, squeezed into each other as if they were a giant accordion. The couple look quite mad, and the madness is everywhere, not simply in their faces and their actions, but in the absurd daisies in their hair, the unreal, cartoon-bright colors of their flesh and clothing, and the impossible bright blue puppies which seem especially hallucinatory.

In Michael Jackson and Bubble, perhaps his finest work to date, Koons chose to represent an actual person as if he were a gilded statue. The work has for its subject the period of almost a year in 1984 when Michael Jackson's video image reached a kind of apotheosis as an alluring, androgynously unreal persona that captured the imagination of the world to a degree that surpassed any previous performer or celebrity. Jackson's image was everywhere: on records, videos, commercials, newspapers, magazines, clothing, jewelry, etc. Yet Jackson himself was reclusive and, in rare appearances outside of his video roles, uncommunicative. There was no real Michael Jackson, despite his constant replication of his image, as whatever existence he may have had was subsumed into, and consumed by, the enormous spectacle of his celebrity.

In a brilliant series of ironies, Koons chose to reverse the process of Jackson's disappearance into his own fame by making him hyper-real: three-dimensional, hard, and larger than life. By showing Jackson as a giant gilded statuette, Koons incorporated into the work a visual material indicative of Jackson's apotheosis, yet at the same time the likeness is perfect. The sculpture really looks like Michael Jackson, and, most distressingly of all, it shares with all successful likenesses, especially those in three dimensions, the sense that it actually is the person. Koons' sculpture of Michael Jackson seems to be inhabited by its subject. Reclining with his chimpanzee in a pose very similar to that of a well-known Etruscan funerary sculpture of a man and his wife, Michael Jackson seems real but trapped, frozen forever into a piece of kitsch.

Karen Sylvester's current work uses the "truth" of photography to disturb and disorient. Until recently she painted enlarged photographs of ordinary people in browish colors and gave them granular surfaces surprisingly similar to Georg Herold's caviar paintings. The images look distressed, as if they had been rescued from a fire a moment before they were to perish. Now Sylvester photographs real people in front of a backdrop made of another painted photograph so as to make us uncertain which is the "real" image. Since both elements are altered with similar, highly artificial tones, it is not always easy to discern which one is real. In fact, we are forced to conclude that artifice and reality are one and the same, thus calling the meaning of both Sylvester's work and our own view of reality into question. Because the images are quite aggressive and confrontational, we respond with considerable anxiety as the ground seems to shift under our feet.

Like Zalopany and Koons, Thomas Ruff also utilizes enormous enlargements of scale to provoke disorientation. His portraits are typically of his friends, dressed and photographed in the most ordinary clothes and with deadpan, unexceptional facial expressions. Blown up to many times larger than life and seen against a uniformly white background, Ruff's friends at first seem to be the subjects of satire, since every mole or facial freckle takes on a monumental scale. A curious thing happens, however, as we look steadily at the faces. Although there is an element of absurdity about them not entirely unlike the work of Andy Warhol, in, for example, his Thirteen Most Wanted Men series of 1964, the faces in Ruff's photographs come in the end to seem meaningfully human and vulnerable, largely due to the apparent artlessness of their representation. With monumental ordinariness and imperfections, they take on a beauty of their own, as we are given a rare chance to study in larger-than-life size the faces of human beings as they actually are. Ordinarily, at such a scale we see only the faces of actors and models, but Petra Lappat and Frank Terhardt are ordinary, imperfect people, unreconstructed by makeup artists and hair stylists. They are, as it were, undefended, and their portraits take on the poignance of their own real existence.

If Ruff has adopted aspects of his work from billboards, Alfredo Jaar has made another advertising medium, illuminated transparencies, serve very different ends. Coyote! is an image of almost unbearable intensity and beauty whose meaning reveals itself only slowly. A crowd of Latin American men seems to have been photographed as they watch an event to the left of the picture frame, perhaps a political speech in a town square. Slowly, however, it dawns on the viewer that there are no old people, women, or children in the photograph, but only men of working age and clearly limited means; that the work's title probably refers to the coyote's habit of coming out at night to search for food; and finally, that the men in the photograph are illegal immigrants to the United States who have been caught by federal agents as they attempted to cross the border at night. Although the men who have turned their faces toward the camera were probably only reacting to the photographer's lights, they seem to look directly out at the viewer. We, in turn, respond to their concentrated gaze by making the natural comparison of our own situation. Slowly, we are given a view of reality into question. Because the images are quite aggressive and confrontational, we respond with considerable anxiety as the ground seems to shift under our feet.
thing similar has taken place in the art of Robert Gober. Though exquisitely aware of the mise en scène of minimalism, Gober has chosen to fabricate with great care and precision such objects as playpens, bags of cat litter, wedding dresses, and sheets of plywood. His sinks are made not of porcelain-covered metal but of plaster, wood, wire lath, and semi-gloss enamel; and they conspicuously lack at least one essential element, usually a drain. Often their form is deviant as well, sometimes exaggerated, sometimes altered in absurd and troubling, though at first sight ordinary, ways. Although they have the refined proportions and near abstract beauty of modernist sculptures, they forcibly allude to the functions of the bathroom. Gober focuses on the apparatus of what is perhaps the most universal and uniform experience in western society, and by displacing its context and distorting its form turns it into a powerful presence. In doing this, of course, he brings out into the open the private world of personal hygiene and all its attendant associations, guilt, and repressions. Curiously, the result is normative and not essentially perverse, and our awareness of our own whole selves is increased. Just as it is when we see a Greek House or a Renaissance Madonna.

What to conclude from all this is somewhat problematical. Certain attitudes and concerns can be said to be shared by some of the artists whose work is included here. A number of them project what might be termed an elegiac mood; some artists appear to be mourning the death of painting, others the doubtful prognosis of art in general, and yet others seem to question whether high culture itself can continue. This cultural pessimism, however, is almost always expressed in work that is witty and sardonic, and sometimes even outrageous. Many of these artists share a concern with contemporary image-making, selecting material from popular culture and presenting it in such a way as to give it a nightmarish edge, thus implying their dismay at the quality of contemporary personal life and questioning the health of modern American and European society. Others express these concerns more directly, often evoking the humane values their fellow artists depict as threatened. To speculate further at this point in time about what may turn out to be the directions of art in the 1990’s would be presumptuous. After all, the artists included here were not selected because their work somehow exemplified a particular direction in art or because showing the work together with others would make or clarify a particular point. They were chosen, rather, on the basis of the perceived quality of their work, and the goal of the exhibition itself has simply been to make available in San Francisco a representative sampling of what seems to be the most interesting new art to emerge over the last few years. No doubt, looked at as cultural artifacts, the works included here could be said to demonstrate certain problems or trends in contemporary life. Such determinations, however, are always more successful a few years after the fact, and perhaps it is enough for now simply to present the work and let it speak for itself.

John Caldwell
Curator of Painting and Sculpture
JIM COLARUSSO
Born in New Rochelle, New York, 1957
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
Untitled (Johns). 1988
stainless steel, photo emulsion, wood, and masonite
48 x 48 x 2 1/4 in. (121.9 x 121.9 x 7.0 cm)
Collection of Don Fisher, San Francisco

Untitled (Pollock). 1988
stainless steel, photo emulsion, wood, and masonite
48 x 48 x 2 1/4 in. (121.9 x 121.9 x 7.0 cm)
Collection of Pia Davis, New York

TIM EBNER
Born in Dayton, Ohio, 1953
Lives and works in Los Angeles
Illustrated:
Untitled. 1989
vacu-formed acrylic
92 in. diameter (233.7 cm diameter)
Collection of Byron R. Meyer, San Francisco

Untitled. 1989
vacu-formed acrylic
92 in. diameter (233.7 cm diameter)
Courtesy Wolff Gallery, New York, and Richard Kohlenschmidt Gallery, Santa Monica
GÜNTER FÖRCH
Born in Fossen, Federal Republic of Germany, 1952
Lives and works in Cologne and Munich.

Illustrated:
- Bleibild 129/88
  (Lead Picture 129/88, 1988
  acrylic on lead on wood
  46.5 x 62.9 in. (118.1 x 160.0 cm)
  San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
  Purchased

-Nach: 1987
  photograph
  111 x 51 in. (281.9 x 129.5 cm)
  Collection of Dom and Eleonora Fisher, San Francisco
  Villa Wittgenstein, Weimar, 1987
  photograph
  111 x 51 in. (281.9 x 129.5 cm)
  San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
  Gift of Ernie and Lynn Hering
  Untitled, 1989
  acrylic on canvas
  102 x 58 in. (260.0 x 148.0 cm)
  Collection of Mimi and Peter Hass, San Francisco

KATHARINA PRITSCH
Born in Essen, Federal Republic of Germany, 1956
Lives and works in Düsseldorf

Illustrated:
- Ghost and Pastel Bridge, 1988
  acrylic
  78 x 213 in. and 21 x 82.5 in.
  (198.1 x 541.3 cm and 53.3 x 209.6 cm)
  Collection of Frank and John Emes, San Francisco
ROBERT GOBER
Born in Wallingford, Connecticut, 1954
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
*Untitled*, 1985
plaster, wire lath, wood, and semi-gloss enamel paint
30 x 34 x 27 in. and 27 x 34 x 27 in.
(76.2 x 86.4 x 68.6 cm and 68.6 x 86.4 x 68.6 cm)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estrin, Washington, D.C.

*The Sink Inside of Me*, 1985
plaster, wire lath, wood, steel, and semi-gloss enamel paint
52 x 84 x 30 in. (132.1 x 213.4 x 76.2 cm)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Melvyn J. Estrin, Washington, D.C.

GEORG HEROLD
Born in Jena, German Democratic Republic, 1947
Lives and works in Cologne
Illustrated:
*Untitled*, 1989
Beluga caviar and lacquer on canvas
118 7/8 x 82 7/8 in. (300 x 210 cm)
Collection of Pat and Bill Wilson, San Francisco

*The Box*, 1989
Beluga caviar and lacquer on canvas
95 x 68 1/4 in. (241.3 x 173.4 cm)
Collection of Byron M. Meyer, San Francisco

*Untitled*, 1989
Beluga caviar and lacquer on canvas
62 1/2 x 43 in. (159 x 109.2 cm)
Collection of Frances and John Bowes, San Francisco
ALFREDO JAAR
Born in Santiago, Chile, 1956
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
Coyote!, 1988
transparency in light box
18 x 96 x 6 in. (45.7 x 243.8 x 15.2 cm)
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, New York
Green Light, 1989
transparency in light box
20 x 20 x 5½ in.
(51.2 x 51.2 x 13.3 cm)
Private collection, San Francisco
White Gloves, 1989
transparency in light box
20 x 20 x 5½ in.
(51.2 x 51.2 x 13.3 cm)
Collection of Pat and Bill Wilson, San Francisco

JEFF KOONS
Born in York, Pennsylvania, 1955
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
Michael Jackson and Bubbles, 1988
porcelain
40 x 70½ x 32½ in.
(101.7 x 179.1 x 82.6 cm)
Collection of the artist, courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York
Song of Majestic, 1989
polychromed wood
42 x 62 x 33 in. (106.7 x 157.5 x 84 cm)
Collection of Byron R. Meyer, San Francisco
CADY NOLAND
Born in Washington, D.C., 1956
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
Stockade. 1987-88
metal with plastic payroll sheets
46 x 127 x 30 in.
(116.8 x 307.3 x 76.2 cm)
Courtesy Luhring Augustine.

CRATE OF BEER. 1988
mixed media (crate with beer cans)
15 x 11 x 12 in.
(38.1 x 27.9 x 30.8 cm)
Collection of Roland and Kathleen Augustine.

THOMAS RUFF
Born in Zell, Federal Republic of Germany, 1958
Lives and works in Dusseldorf
Illustrated:
Portrait. Petro Leopold. 1988
Type C print
63 x 45 in.
(160 x 114.3 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Anthony Meier.
Portrait. Frank Terhordt. 1988
Type C print
83 x 65 in.
(210.8 x 165.1 cm)
Jederman Collection N. A.
KAREN SYLVESTER
Born in Milwaukee, 1957
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
Untitled, 1990
Photo emulsion and oil on canvas
68 x 46 in. (172.7 x 116.8 cm)
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York
Untitled, 1989
Photo emulsion and oil on canvas
68 x 46 in. (172.7 x 116.8 cm)
Collection of Alan Power, Santa Monica

CHRISTOPHER WOOL
Born in Chicago, 1955
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
Untitled, 1989
Alkyd and acrylic on aluminum
96 x 64 in. (243.8 x 162.6 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Purchase
Untitled, 1986
Alkyd on aluminum and steel
72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 121.9 cm)
Collection of Pat and Bill Wilson, San Francisco
Untitled, 1989
Alkyd and acrylic on aluminum
90 x 60 in. (228.6 x 152.4 cm)
Private collection, San Francisco
MICHELE ZALOPANY
Born in Detroit, 1955
Lives and works in New York
Illustrated:
The Bedroom. 1987
Charcoal on paper on canvas
57 1/2 x 99 3/16 in. (146.1 x 251.9 cm)
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art:
Margaret K. Walker Memorial Fund Purchase

Photography:
Barb Blackwell: pp. 9, 10, 21, and 22
James Franklin: Photography Los Angeles: p. 11
Hoff: p. 19
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York: p. 17
Courtesy John Gibson Gallery, New York: p. 18
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York: p. 28