
ART IN REVIEW

Steven Evans

Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery
453 West 17th Street
Chelsea
Through June 20

This small, spare show looks, at a glance, like a stylish study in Halloween décor, with three apparently solid-black paintings and a black geometric sculpture placed against bright orange walls. But a fifth piece — a masklike head molded from wire mesh and fringed with a beard of human hair — offers a clue to a mortuary theme embedded in the other work.

Seen close-up, for example, the paintings turn out to be images of Victorian floral funerary arrangements rendered in subtle color on black taffeta. The black abstract sculpture proves to be a rectangular display pedestal sheathed top to bottom in a fabric used for the lining of men's suits. The cloth is silk-screened with words from an 1890's children's ditty forbidding singing on Sunday.

The 19th-century Gothic riffs Mr. Evans is playing with have seen overly hard usage of late, but he does interesting things with them. He alludes, for example, to an undercurrent of mourning that might be detected in postwar art. The pedestal suggests a piece of bunting-draped furniture, but also a Minimalist sculpture; the floral images, though derived from Victorian sources, echo Warhol's silk-screened flowers from the 1960's.

And the fact that one of the paintings is of a woman's funerary hairpiece raises questions of gender and sexuality. Mourning a century ago was primarily women's work, as is attested by the vast popular literature devoted to the subject, from instructions on fashion and etiquette to treatises on spiritualism. But with the presence of AIDS in the 1990's, rituals of loss and grief have become central to the lives of men, specifically gay men. Mr. Evans doesn't wrap any of these ideas up neatly or follow them far, but by spinning them out with deceptively simple means, he gives plenty to think about.

HOLLAND COTTER