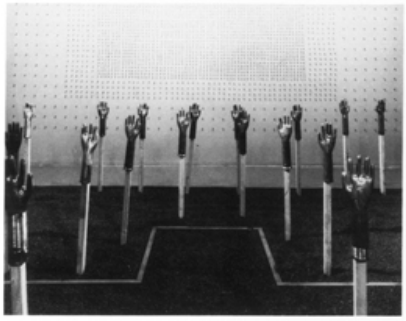
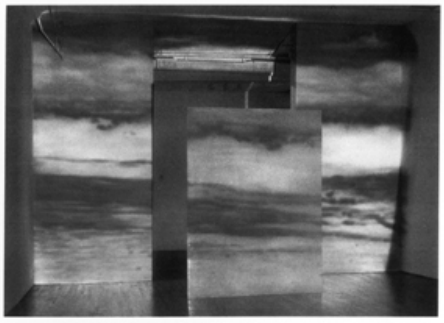
ARTFORUM



Mildred Howard, *Ten Little Children Standing in a Line (one got shot, and then there were nine)*, 1991, mixed media, 13¾ × 30 × 51½". Installation view.



Diana Thater, *Dogs and Other Philosophers*, 1991. Video installation.

implications. Since the late '60s her work has constituted a deeply personal and rather hermetic quest for images achieving the state of grace that has traditionally been the highest and most noble aim of picture making. This midcareer retrospective of over 60 paintings, drawings, and mixed-media works was a call to conscience, reflecting everywhere Rossi's effort to create a parallel universe mirroring the most fundamental aspirations of humankind.

It is line that drives Rossi's art, and there are moments, particularly within her earlier pieces, that seem the work of a medieval Celtic illuminator loose on the streets of Chicago. Rossi's line wends its way across her drawings and paintings in febrile and numbing accretion, and the furious tangle results in a flatness that is only modulated by her use of color. Her early abstracted heads, painstakingly painted on the reverse side of Plexiglas sheets, exhibit a scrupulous commitment to detail; bulbous and confrontational, they are incredibly varied in effect. Frequently, as in works such as *3-D Do*, 1973, their surfaces are studded with thousands of small dots of acrylic paint, creating a pointillist effect that is hypnotic in its doggedness. Dot and line accrue to suggest a kind of pictorial Morse code that seems to obey its own logic, though it is, of course, the direct result of Rossi's technique.

In the mid '70s Rossi began to depict groups of her highly abstracted figures in complex spatial environments. Here, rhythmic and compositional echoes culled from sources such as Indian miniatures and Sienese painting are arranged with a delicacy of balance and control. Gestures find their counterparts and actions their resolutions in charged harmonies suggesting that pattern can function as a signage capable of reflecting the human condition. Inter- and extrapersonal relationships play themselves out in winsome scenarios that are not too determinate, at times achieving an aura similar to Fernand Léger's late work. In *Orange A.M.*, 1983, Rossi portrays a figure that balances the traditions of the Gupta figurine and the Western odalisque. Watched by an ostensibly male head at the left, this woman's body writhes with a sensual abandon that is apparent despite the economy of anatomical detail. Rossi achieves an essence here, pictorialized in the bold pastel tones that link these compositions. Her recent work includes a number of tableaux that are surprisingly classical in flavor, with the labyrinthine complexities of her earlier work slowed into dramas that are more paced. Both bodies of work are linked by the belief that an entire cosmology can be inscribed within these objects.

–James Yood

SAN FRANCISCO

MILDRED HOWARD

WALTER/McBEAN GALLERY

As immune as we have become to the media's grim recitation of violent events, the death of children still shocks and saddens most of us. Although almost fifteen years have passed since the summer day in 1976 when South African soldiers gunned down black children in Soweto, the memory of that event still has the power to move us – particularly as it has been invoked in Mildred Howard's installation *Ten Little Children Standing in a Line (one got shot, and then there were nine)*, 1991. Simultaneously a memorial and a plea for the end of racial violence, Howard's piece is centered around a powerful constellation of related elements made from simple materials. With them, she transforms the chilly neutrality of the gallery/museum space into a meeting place – church, town hall, cemetery – charged with the emotions of love, grief, and anger; a place where the living talk and pray together, and the dead can be mourned and remembered.

The high walls of the gallery have been painted a warm, earthy tint of coppery tan. Covering much of the floor is a large rectangle of reddish sawdust, its expanse divided into three smaller areas by a cruciform path of gray gravel. The path's shape suggests the traditional nave-transept configuration of a church, an association reiterated by the metaphorical congregation Howard has planted in the sawdust matrix; waist-high sticks of raw pine, too many to count, act as supports for hollow copper hands. Palms opened flat in a gesture of simultaneous supplication and demand, these hands – molds for rubber gloves – seem to address themselves both to the viewer and to a gleaming pattern on the far wall, of what appears to be thousands of copper rivets. On closer inspection, this dense rectangle of dots turns out to be composed of the spent casings of bullets.

In the adjacent space that runs along the main space like a side chapel, white lines define empty frames on the wall, each captioned with the description of a scene of death or violence taken from news photos from South Africa, dated and coded with wire-service symbols. At the end of the room, one such image, left uncaptioned, hangs on the wall. It's the picture that ran in every paper in the world in 1976, of a boy and a girl stumbling in terror down a dirt road, weeping. The boy carries the body of a dead child; the girl's hand is raised, as if begging someone to stop.

In this church, the face of God is composed from gleaming points of light reflecting from bullet casings. In this gravel and sawdust cemetery, the markers – made not of stone or marble, but of wood and copper – raise their hands toward heaven, in a gesture of supplication that echoes that of the little girl in the photograph. It also voices a demand of the many, living and dead, who want only to be accorded the right to speak the language of their choice, to vote, and to live freely as human beings.

–Maria Porges

LOS ANGELES

DIANA THATER

DOROTHY GOLDEEN GALLERY

The title of Diana Thater's latest video installation, *Dogs and Other Philosophers*, 1991, refers to Thomas Hardy's meditation on "the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion, and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise." In Hardy's novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, 1874, from which the phrase was lifted, logical conclusions are disclosed as tragically wrong-headed; in fact, the earnest young sheepdog pursues his flock so diligently that he ends up herding them over the edge of a cliff. Thater suggests that a more appropriate logic would be one based on contingency and indeterminacy, in which duration and perpetual change are acknowledged.

Thater's theoretical mentor would appear

Mildred Howard

May 1991

WALTER/MCBEAN GALLERY

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— *Maria Porges*