



From left: Lester Goldman, *Boxcar*, 2003, fiberglass, auto enamel, plexiglass, neoprene, 26" x 70" x 70"; Rachel Hayes, *Novella*, 1998, dyed silk, 68" x 56" x 1".

Before and After the *Is / Was* at Joseph Nease

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Is/Was
Joseph Nease Gallery
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Langston Hughes asked his readers what became of dreams deferred. If we conceive something, how does its tactility re- or degenerate? Joseph Nease recently played a curatorial game by placing a group of talented artists on a five-year span. In *Is / Was*, Nease asked artists to pair recent work with five year old pieces. The dates on the title list revealed the progression, and sometimes regression, of each artist. The differences in aesthetic and material were subtle in some cases and extreme in others. While Stephen Fleming's two clay sculptures morphed from an elegant grocery-prepped bird body to a smooth abstraction of linked hands or joints, other artists jumped so far from earlier material, the work seemed unassociated.

Lester Goldman's earlier piece *Atmospheric Secretions*, a line-drawn face oozing beautiful blue watercolor bulbs from infected pores, seemed a generation away from *Boxcar*, the surprise of the show. Four neatly placed, pearlescent green spheres lift neon lime screen faces to their audience. Car enamel smooth and precociously low to the ground, the 26x70x70" sculpture insinuated some further device. I felt marketed to. I expected the flat bright plastic squares to light up and reveal their true purpose. Goldman's ability to subvert a juicy political gimp into such a cold and simple sculpture was impressive. Airbags break necks and minivans tip over. The new Volkswagen Bugs have spawned polyps.

Raissa Venables' photographs provided an easy to follow progression. *Cemention*, a 1999 luster-coat C-print is a seed to the harrowing *Aimee's Stairs*. A looming 62x48", digitally altered photograph of a bending apartment staircase took on every bad dream and phobia the mind could muster. The extreme foreshortening of the space and the extra angle of the mundane corner strips and stained carpet burst any reassurance a small potted flower in the space's windowsill may have provided. While *Cemention*'s murkiness is creepy and interesting in its thin digital layers, *Aimee's Stairs* is far more poignant and refreshingly direct.

Susan White's humorously titled video projection,

Looking Inside the Box, provided the sole sound component to the exhibition through a warped Sesame Streetesque tour of Tony's Pizza Factory. Playing with scale and sound, White's clever editing of the documentary footage cut it into greasy abstractions. Meatballs drum and race across the screen in a polka-dotted frenzy. Moist globs of dough push across conveyor belts. White's recent *Pyrograph*, a beautiful and obsessive layering of burns on paper, worked well with the repetitive images playing across the screen. Her take on patterning and rhythm kept my interest throughout the entire pizza-making process and I was pulled into the drawing not only by the image, but also by the smell of the paper.

For the brunt of *Is / Was*, I found reason to dislike newer work in comparison to older efforts. I enjoyed James Brinsfield's earlier muted paintings as opposed to his brighter *Is-es*. His decision to avoid the formal issues of the earlier piece appears to stifle his newer, bright and shiny collages. The paradox in reviewing both is that they were made by the same hand. The actual critique is based more on the artist's direction, rather than the pieces themselves.

I equally enjoyed Rachel Hayes' two pieces in the exhibit. Her earlier work is a flayed fabric shield in blues and browns, and the recent, glossier *Palate Expansion*, is a 69" x 111" wall hanging that shimmers with the air. The Dolphin recently exhibited a similar piece — squares of translucent color pieced together in scales. Her ability to shift from earthy materials to something so evidently man-made, without losing the natural flow of visual connections, was inspiring.

James Woodfill combined both essay questions into a single poem. *Did / Does* is a whirling dervish of light and plastic that unites elements from five-year-old projects with current investigations. I watched the

spinning elements as I listened to Joseph Nease explain how he would be closing his doors at the end of December, for a well-deserved two-year-hiatus. He said he looked forward to the interval and sees it as an opportunity to look at new work. Great shows and hard work deserve good breaks and time-outs. I'll look forward to their next show.

