

# Debunking American Myths

by Hunter Drohojowska

**T**he way America sees itself has provided the subject matter for countless artists over the centuries. The art has tended to reflect a national sentiment that, until the 1960s, more often than not embodied the spirit of optimism, hope and expansion. Vietnam changed all that, and today America's character in the world drama is scrutinized with skepticism by artists. Many young artists have been cannibalizing art historical styles recently, and a few have been looking at the way artists have traditionally created and perpetuated myths.

From the turn of the century through the Cold War, America was an appropriate place for optimism, for a celebration of the Industrial Age. Factories, railroads, and the advent of airplanes and automobiles induced speculation about the future liberating benefits of the machine. Art was often sanguine in reflecting this thinking. The fractured advances of cubism grew out of this new interest in time and motion; precisionist painters made beautiful abstractions out of the Third Avenue Elevated; social influences and stylistic developments are evident in the latest work of Jill Giegerich. But her view is from the present, looking at the past with no small amount of dismay and despair.

Giegerich's installation is a jigsaw puzzle of truncated elements that cohere as a statement. The principal work is a large figure in relief with brawny arms and an angular head, a constructivist-styled worker. Around his tapered waist are gathered the products of his labor, generic renderings of factories, a car, a freeway, and a bottle of some chemical or perhaps liquor. The whole is constructed of industrial materials both real — such as roofing and asphalt-covered papers — and simulated — exaggerated wood grain

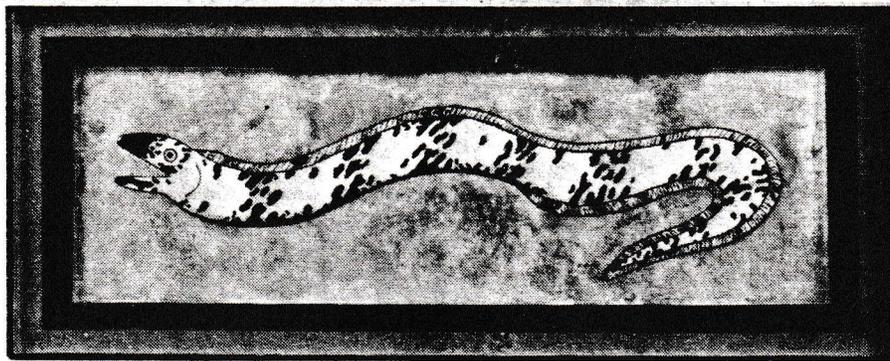


Jill Giegerich's Untitled (1983).

printed on paper. Both the styles and materials of this figure and other works in the installation are derived from the cubist and constructivist movements, whose artists had great faith in a future modified by technology. However, this installation suggests that Giegerich does not share this view. She is appropriating the substance of art history to unravel the myths created by those artists, to say the hope for industry was misplaced and today we live with the repercussions.

Among the reliefs placed strategically along the walls are a freeway that leads nowhere, and a staircase that does the same. A shadowy silhouette of a head is bowed as though under the force of an arm and fist

that is poised as though ready to strike. A pillar, the characteristic support of temples of commerce, stands alone and flimsy against a gallery column. Like a prop of a stage set, it is a false appearance, a hollow symbol metaphorically standing for the institutions and attitudes that no longer have currency. The work and philosophies of the past are demystified, even vaporized, and only ghosts remain. The essence of the installation is one of poetic loss, as manifested in a brass wire outline of a globe stand, which is empty, with no world to support. Giegerich's work may be seen at the Margo Leavin Gallery through October 15.



Douglas M. Parker

White Eel from Rarotonga by Jeffrey Vallance.

**J**effrey Vallance works very differently from Giegerich but he too is examining the myths perpetuated by an optimistic America. Long attracted to the kitsch cultivated in suburbia, last year he focused upon the tikis and Polynesian decor imported after World War II. According to the artist's statement posted in his current exhibition "Aitatuki," Vallance then became interested in actual South Seas culture, and went on a research expedition to the Cook and Society Islands, Fiji and Tahiti.

Vallance found that Tiki was not a funny-looking statuette but a god, the first man. He has posted the hilarious legends of Tiki on the gallery wall, and they recount the randy exploits of Tiki and his daughter. These have earned him the island nickname of "Tiki, the Slimy," and "Tiki, the Rigid." Vallance has created a number of relief images of Tiki,

usually with a distended member. Most are stony brown, as if carved from lava, and framed in elaborated Polynesian restaurant style. Around the borders of the tikis are decals of buxom women in bathing suits in the cheesecake poses typical of the 1940s. By melding the imagery of the island and American cultures, Vallance displays a common preoccupation.

In a series of pencil drawings in a naive and heavy-handed technique, Vallance records all of the expected island imagery — birds, bugs, plants, natives — but it is combined with evidence of Western influence, such as canned corned beef, Surf coldwater

detergent, buses, bottled juice, and Captain Cook. By combining the information from the two cultures again, Vallance reveals influences cutting two ways.

Vallance has previously used the icons and personalities of popular culture in his work, his series of drawings of Connie Chung, for example. (There is a Connie-tiki in this show, right next to a Kon-tiki.) But Vallance has gone beyond representing such elements for their sheer zany power. The current work explores the way the surrounding environment provides the context for perception. One culture's deity is another culture's restaurant decor. Transplanted again, in the gallery, it attains the status of fine art. By extension, Vallance is also looking at what constitutes art and its function in the islands and contrasts that with the prevailing view of art in America. Vallance's work will be at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery through October 15. ■