

Art

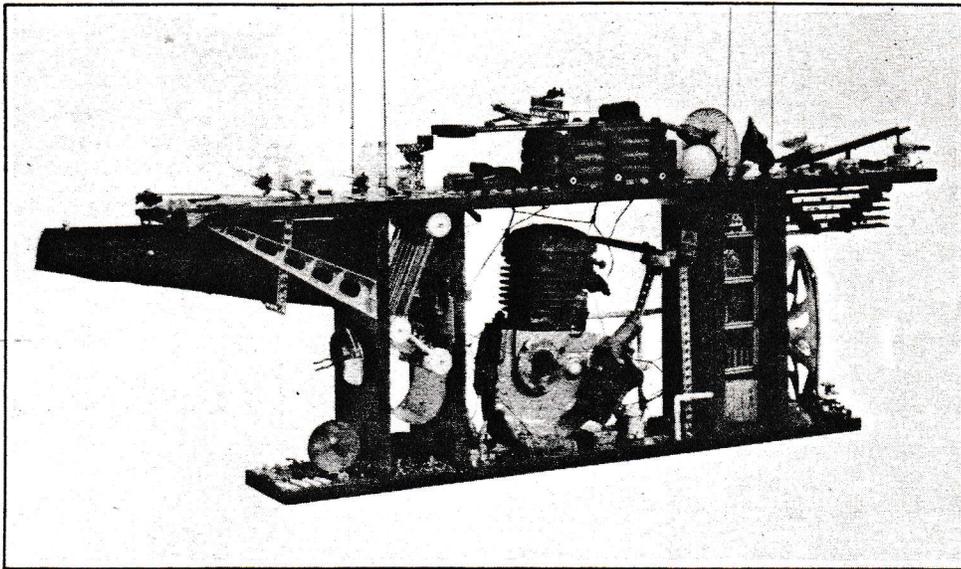
by Hunter Drohojowska

The line between symbol and cliché can be as thin and permeable as a membrane. Because clichés are predicated upon fundamental truths, even as banalities they have universal meaning. Hearts and flowers indicate romance, a skull and crossbones signifies danger. The symbol that is overused becomes a cliché, yet cliché employed in a knowing context can regain its power as a symbol. Clichés operate as cultural jargon and like symbols, act as shorthand for a larger body of information.

In very different ways, Raul Guerrero and William Leavitt are using clichés as personal symbols, hence empowering them with new meaning. The exhibition of their work continues at the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery through February 11.

Guerrero's symbolism is eccentric, eclectic, yet legible. Conceptually, the show is similar to his last, in 1982 at the L.A. Institute of Contemporary Art. The elegant pictures add up to an oblique narrative on the subject of romance and loss. A spare linear image in gradations of aqua and lime printed on a black background depicts a pensive woman watching the future in a crystal ball. She sees the proverbial tall dark man being watched by another woman. This intimation of betrayal is echoed by a striking scarlet and black painting rife with common symbols. A three-legged table of voluptuous feminine curves stands before other furniture that has been draped in sheets as though for a period without use. On the table rests a smart martini glass; an empty picture frame; a bottle marked as poison with a death's head cork; and the "poison pen," its ink in bloodlike blots on the table. Over the entire scene is a spider web, the pattern of entrapment or musty age, and the words "Ha, ha, ha . . ." The message conveyed by the common symbols is as obvious as the plot of a B-movie, but it also smacks of revelation, as though the artist were using his work as a diary. Three smaller etchings depict a faceless woman's bust, a flickering candle, a

Obsessions With Symbols, Cliches And Technology



Chris Burden's "The Nina," 1982.

sword curved into an S-shape that resonate on a more esoteric plane as though providing the ambience for the more active images. Aside from the narrative theme, the five works — all thoughtfully framed — are linked by their formal grace and refinement.

William Leavitt's drawings in pastel on paper are more clichéd yet less easily understood. Drawings of the front of the Ambassador Hotel and of the interior of a room with a chair and standing lamp verge on the illustrational. Stylistically, they recall the conventional renderings in real estate catalogues. But their ordinariness also is extraordinary, even surreal. There is a sense of compression in the room with the chair. The

asbestos tiles on the ceiling match the tiles on the floor, and the room is created by a thick wall of wood-grain formica that separates it from a strange, supple plant. The scene takes on a malevolent aura in keeping with its title, "Electric Chair." Leavitt draws the landscapes and scenes of suburbia, Los Angeles' in particular, and perhaps by merely maintaining a tight focus, he captures the horror, the bizarre relationship between nature and culture in a wholly artificial atmosphere. Trees are boxwoods in planters in front of a hotel, the moon is seen on a billboard. The images look like clichés because they are taken from an environment of clichés, but, rendered by Leavitt, they become his personal symbols. The drawings are arid stage sets on which players will act out the futile drama, but it is a drama that we will never see. In Leavitt's work, the action is just about to begin. It evokes a sense of waiting, waiting without purpose.

Chris Burden began questioning America's relationship to technology when he invented the B-car in 1977. He set out to create a vehicle that would get 100 miles per gallon and go 100 miles per hour. He built a go-cart that did neither, but it served as a catalyst for subsequent sculptures and performances in which he explored the power of science and technology. His exhibition, at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery through February 11, includes his "Speed of Light Machine." This simple apparatus of mirrors and lenses — reconstructed from a 19th-century original — looks like the machine an ophthalmologist uses, yet it demonstrates that light travels at 186,000 miles per second. We are awed by that knowledge and amused at the simplicity of the contraption. Burden destroys the intimidation a lay person feels when confronted with sophisticated technology. He also reveals how little we understand it. In an adjacent room, there stands a large

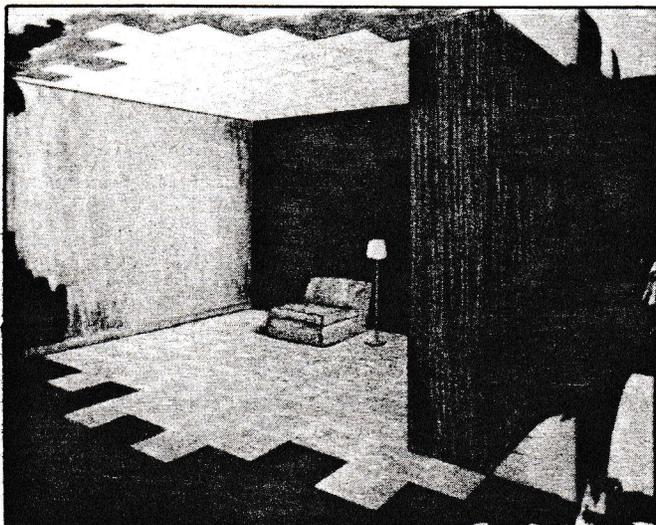
steel bar perforated with a line of tiny holes to emit compressed air. When pushed, "The Frictionless Sled," a three-sided plastic box, glides back and forth on a cushion of air. The machine looks sober and efficient, but it is practically useless, pointing up the hilarious absurdity that can be reached in techno-obsession. It recalls Burden's "Big Wheel," a 2,000 pound fly wheel that was set into awesome purposeless rotation when the artist revved an attached motorcycle.

These enterprises not only puncture the aura surrounding technology, they remind us that pure science is an endeavor of search and exploration in much the way that art can be. Experiments are undertaken when results cannot be predicted.

There is an anecdote among physicists that Christopher Columbus was remarkable not for being a great navigator or a great theoretician, but because he came to a point in the ocean where he had just enough provisions to return home and he decided to go on. That same faith in exploration surfaces in Burden's art.

Hanging from the gallery ceiling are a number of "ships," vehicles of exploration and also destruction. The "Nina" and the "Pinta," named after Columbus's ships, are intricate sculptural discussions of civilization's infatuation with technology in warfare. In simple wooden frames, the interior of the ships are composed of bits of Tinker Toys and Erector Sets, myriad toy soldiers and tanks. Two suspended "glass ships" are outfitted for travel to outer space. But these share the gallery with beves of dangling submarines designed to explode. One has been blasted to show the results. On the bottom of another, Burden has written, "In the end, there will only be a few lucky subs."

For all the optimistic faith in Burden's work, there is an equal measure of alarm. In this balance, his art achieves a sophisticated blend of politics, history, and aesthetics. ■



William Leavitt's "Electric Chair," 1983.