

is another Tommy Boy "production thing" called "Handsome Boy Modeling School," with performers as diverse as Sean Lennon, Mike D., of the Beastie Boys, and Thom Yorke, of Radiohead. He is also working with a new discovery, who goes by the name of M.C. Paul Barman—a white guy who is freakier and therefore riskier

than Eminem, the vanilla flavor of the month. From the sound of Barman's first single, "Post Graduate Work," he's also got a love for the complications that can arise from listening to several voices at once and knowing that it's not just how they sound but how they make you listen to yourself, wrapped up in all your colors. ♦

THE ART WORLD

SELECTIVE AFFINITIES

The artist as curator.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



AN exhibition organized by the enigmatic sculptor and installation artist Robert Gober contains nothing that he made. It is a group show at the Matthew Marks Gallery, on West Twenty-second Street (through September 18th), of five not very well known artists: Anni Albers, Robert Beck, Cady Noland, Joan Semmel, and Nancy Shaver. Summer group shows—shallowly breathing signs of life to fill the art business's torpid months—are generally forgotten as soon as viewed, if not faster. This one won't be. Gober's untitled curatorial performance is a lovely act of tribute to colleagues and a feat of self-revelation. At a time when so much contemporary curating is overthought and underfelt, Gober demonstrates the neglected option of an artist's-eye view. The show has haunted me since I first saw it, and it will haunt you, too, if you let it.

Gober is a star of the last decade. That much about him, and little else, is clear. He rose to fame in synch with some baleful early-nineties fashions: identity and gender politics, queer theory, deconstructionist social criticism, and brainy excruciations about "the body." Those preoccupations have faded in recent years, I'm glad to note. Young artists lately seem comfortable with aesthetic pleasure not as a symptom of "commodity fetishism," say, but as an indispensable value. The changing critical climate seems sure to alter Gober's reputation, but perhaps more sideways

than downward. He has never scanted pleasure, for one thing. He just laces it with certain toxins.

Gober is known for making wax casts of male legs (usually clad in shoes, socks, and pants) and of whole lower male bodies (usually naked), protruding from walls at floor level. The flesh bristles with real hair and may creepily sprout into candles or morph, in places, into sinklike drains. Gober is keen on sinks and drains, and on running water, which, in some of his installations, gushes from spigots or gurgles beneath the floor. In one notorious piece, a section of culvert mounted through the middle of a statue of the Virgin Mary reinterprets divine intercession as road plumbing. Gober's symbols of hygiene stir thoughts of its antagonists: dirt, sickness, death. Much of his work seems to be indirectly—even quite delicately—about physical fear and loathing. He exercises considerable tact when he is exploring gloomy obsessions—whether his own or, on this occasion, other people's.

DAYLIGHT dimly illuminates the huge front room at Marks through the gallery's glass front. (The room's skylights are shrouded in black.) We hear a rasping, insistent noise. The sound comes from a video monitor that plays a three-and-a-half-minute tape loop by Robert Beck, an eclectic artist who specializes in allusions to desire and dread out in the woods. On the screen, a man (Beck's father, reportedly)

toils with a carpenter's saw in a snowy yard as he cuts the antlers out of a deer's severed head. The chore is disagreeable. The man, whose face is not seen, mutters "yuck" a couple of times. The sawing goes on and on. I yearn for the guy to stop, or at least to employ a more efficient tool. But gradually, encouraged by Gober's tacit endorsement, I am disarmed by Beck's grave scrutiny of this repulsive and banal scene. It comes to stand for any effort to master personal nightmares through sheer endurance.

Across the room from Beck's video hangs a fabric work, "Black-White-Gray," which was designed at the Bauhaus, in 1927, by the late Anni Albers, the wife of Josef Albers. It is on loan from the Museum of Modern Art. In general, textiles don't do a lot for me except in passing, as decorations. This textile riveted me. The formal intelligence behind its asymmetrical arrangement of squares and rectangles of black, white, and two grainy grays is phenomenal—way overqualified for what was originally intended as a tablecloth. The weaving could also function as the spread for a child-sized bed—an association made irresistible by Gober's own psychologically fraught riffs on cribs and playpens. As refined a work as the Beck is gross, the Albers isn't a whit less impressive or—because of its selection by Gober—less insinuating.

This show suggests to me a metaphorical family romance, in which Beck's tape evokes a traumatizing dad and Albers's textile an exacting mom. The other works at Marks complete the analogy: Cady Noland as a sister in misery; Joan Semmel as a raffishly louche aunt; and Nancy Shaver as an exemplary older cousin. Noland is an especially welcome presence. I've missed her. She has exhibited rarely in recent years, after a thrilling run in the early nineties with installations of vaguely and not so vaguely carceral items (chain-link fencing, handcuffs) and variously charged Americana references (barbecues, Charles Manson). At Marks, her new sculpture, entitled "Stand-In for a Stand-In," is an elegant totem of savage guilt.

Installed by Gober between the Beck and the Albers, the blockily monumental Noland is an abstracted rendition of penal stocks. Five holes are positioned to imprison ankles, wrists, and neck. The unit is made of a corrugated silver cardboard that suggests soft-

finished aluminum when it's viewed from a distance. Why do I find the image's nasty resonance so exhilarating? The reason is art historical. Noland and Gober are heirs of Minimalism, and they both explore the nastiness that is latent in the classic Minimalist sculpture of, for example, Donald Judd, whose boxes amount to drastically dehumanized equivalents of the human body. Noland and Gober tap the hysteria that always seethed beneath the impassivity of what Judd primly termed

like an evil shrine, another canvas depicts the outstretched bare arm of the artist/viewer washing the leg of a preteen boy who, standing in a bathtub, evinces a budding erection. The vision recalls, as if by an electric arc, another violating arm: the one that is intent on phallic antlers in Beck's video. (Come to think of it, those antlers are unbranched spikes—likewise immature.) Semmel can hardly have anticipated a male gaze like Gober's, which infuses her subjects with all-around identifica-

I never thought that I would feel nostalgic for the onset of the "anti-aesthetic"—as such stuff actually came to be labelled, with critical approbation. But even a dubious idea, when new, possesses a tonic bite. I am convinced that Gober wants me to register precisely this freshness and to deduce that it marks an important stage in his past artistic education. Looking at Shaver's tendentious, tiny shirts, I get a vicarious kick of discovery.

If you tossed these five artists in



Gober's show at the Matthew Marks Gallery. Left to right: Semmel's "Touch," Noland's "Stand-In for a Stand-In," and a Beck video.

"specific objects." The effect is both impudent and mightily demystifying.

Joan Semmel, who started her career as an Abstract Expressionist some forty years ago, became an avowed feminist painter in the nineteen-seventies. Her aim is to render the female nude with, in her words, "a female subjectivity that does not accommodate the male gaze." The gaze in her pictures is explicitly hers, as she looks down the foreshortened length of her own body. On the side walls of the front room at Marks, two paintings show Semmel accompanied by a man in attitudes that are possibly pre- and postcoital. In a back room, spotlighted

tion: as woman, man, and boy at once.

Nancy Shaver is represented by seventeen modest black-and-white photographs picturing toddlers' T-shirts that are imprinted with designs of adult presumption, such as football, Miss America, and the message "I'm a Little Stinker." Unfamiliar to me, this body of work bears a significant date: 1975-77, ahead of the Post-Structuralist wave that the photographs typify. Shaver was, precociously, onto appropriation, presentation (as opposed to representation), and deconstruction (of, say, "socially constructed identity"). It's all there, with both disarming zest and something like innocence.

a Cuisinart and punched "Blend," would you pour out a Gober? No, but the resulting gunk might—upon analysis—yield reliable statistics on the nutritional content of a Gober. I wish exhibitions like this happened more often. In considering any superior artist, we wonder how he or she got that way; but it is the nature of first-rate talents to subsume influences while covering their tracks. Asking artists about such matters rarely helps. Most artists are no good at telling. Artists show. Today we crave what they can reveal about one another. Gober's curatorship speaks to Baudelaire's definition of good criticism: that it be "partial, passionate, and political." ♦