

Psychological manipulation

"Michael Asher-Morgan Thomas at Claire Copley Gallery Inc.; Claire Copley Gallery Inc. at Morgan Thomas," reads the exhibition announcement, and most viewers go to both galleries to see Michael Asher's new work. What they find is Claire Copley exhibiting her gallery artists—Daniel Buren, the day I went—at Morgan Thomas' gallery, while Morgan Thomas shows Raul Guerrero and Donald Metzler at the Copley Gallery. "Where is Asher's work to be seen?" wonder many confused gallery goers, as it is nowhere in evidence either on the walls or in a physical alteration of the gallery space itself. (In Asher's last show at the Copley Gallery he removed the partition between Copley's office and exhibition space, eliminating the dealer's privacy along with the wall.)

The new work is a psychological manipulation/investigation of the artist/dealer and dealer/public relationships and interactions. It tests each woman's relationship as a dealer to the physical space where she works, her territoriality, how much her psyche (and by extension ours) is tied up with her environment. Both women have learned about their own needs and styles as dealers from the experience. Copley, whose gallery is located on the relatively heavily trafficked La Cienega Boulevard misses the activity, the street traffic which inadvertently finds its way into the gallery, as well as those who regularly make the rounds. By contrast Thomas' gallery is located on the west side of town, on Santa Monica Boulevard off the beaten path, so to speak, in a small upstairs space where she lives as well as works. She feels that living and working in separate spaces, as she must during the Asher exhibition, has a fragmenting effect on her psyche.

This work of Asher's was on exhibit simultaneously with a work for LAICA in which he asked two, three or four people each day simply to sit in the gallery and talk among themselves and/or to the gallery vis-

itors. From this experience, too, various new kinds of relationships developed relating to the art public. In either case some sort of interaction with, or at least observations of, actual human beings was necessary in order to "see" the piece. Opinions differ widely regarding the meaning and motivations of the piece. I see it as a humanizing experience of the art world, in contrast to the elitist relationships and sterile spaces often encountered in gallery situations. Asher's medium is other people in the art world, and in that sense his recent work might be seen as setting in motion a performance without a scenario.

Among the cognoscenti of Asher's work, his activity seems to have overshadowed somewhat the artists actually on exhibit in the respective galleries—Buren, Guerrero and Metzler. Buren sent several pieces of striped fabric, painted at the edges and pre-cut in various geometric shapes, together with directions for installation. These portable pieces are conceived to be installed anywhere, not for a particular space. Both minimal and decorative, they interact effectively with the small windows and skylights of Thomas' space. One fabric polygon fortuitously echoes the shape of the adjacent light form reflected from the skylight. The exhibit demonstrates once more that an artist can make his esthetic mark on any space with minimal means.

Guerrero exhibits a plaster-of-paris bust of Beethoven which he has "flocked" with bright orange sand. The object is kitsch, vulgar, confusing. Together with this object he shows a triptych of three black and white photographs of the bust, taken with a home-made, pinhole camera. The resulting images are ghostly, difficult to discern, like so-called spirit photographs. A fourth photograph in color, a clear precise print, is equally bizarre. Somehow the glossy, slick reproduction of a ridiculous object lends it an air of credibility that is completely consistent with its actual material presence. The photographer Metzler in the second gallery has chosen images that relate with wry wit to Guerrero's—a "bust" (nude women in swimming pool visible from the torso up) and ambiguous tracks in sand. Since these two artists did not know each other before the exhibition, the degree of their supportive interaction is remarkable. It is as if the situations which Asher set up to force new modes of interaction on the two dealers has subtly affected the content of their exhibitions.

—MELINDA WORTZ