

life)—was also included.

In *Hotel Delacourt* (1966), a work which was representative of the first category, Sonnier draped a filmy rectangle of Dacron obliquely in front of two short diagonal lengths of neon tubing. He then finished off this scheme of superimposed rhyming diagonals with three smears of a pleasantly disagreeable-looking olive green substance—auto body filler, it seems. Rubber-covered electrical cords traced a languid path from the neon down to a black transformer box on the floor, which served visually as the base of the work. As in all Sonnier's light pieces, the electrical paraphernalia here was not merely functional; it was absorbed into the overall gesture of the assemblage.

The maquettes depend on simple but no less striking combinations of materials. For instance, a small, pink satin cushion was stitched with parallel rows of steel wire, producing an effect at once creepy and alluring. This stitching motif was repeated in an understated little Sadean fetish featuring a scrap of fleshlike foam rubber sewn to a half-cylinder of aluminum screening. As I looked at Sonnier's deceptively casual concoctions, I thought often of Rauschenberg's characteristic juxtapositions of smooth and rough elements (fine textiles against automobile tires, for example); of his play with the transparency and translucency of both silk-screened images and fabrics; and of his pictorial conception of structure—that is, the way he composes in planes parallel to and near the wall.

However, Sonnier's use of similar devices isn't excessively dependent on Rauschenberg, since it's leavened with so many other interests and influences, including not only Surrealist objects but also Cubist relief sculpture, Japanese and African art, and the early pieces in neon and rubber by Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra. Sonnier is completely secure in his ability to imbue his sources with his own sensibility, a confidence that makes his work as richly suggestive as it is original.

I thought of Rauschenberg for another reason as well: his funky humor, sometimes unexpectedly delicate sensuality and faintly morbid air—of



Installation view of Vito Acconci's *Landing*, 1987, mixed mediums; at International with Monument.



Delany Davis: *Pig Grave*, 1987, oil and resin on gypsum and fiberglass with sand, 24 by 36 by 3 inches; at Pizzo Electric.

which *Red* is a prime example—are qualities one associates with southern artists both visual and literary. Sonnier is a native of south Louisiana, and many of the elements in his early work have a distinctly southern ambience. Examples are a mirror half-covered with fluorescent paint, or the tawdry but appealing bits of fabric like nylon stockings or remnants of a nightgown, elsewhere, daubs of subdued color, bits of spongy foam rubber, even the lazy light cords dangling to the floor express a delight in the sensuality of lassitude and decay that's as southern as Faulkner's "dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wisteria."

Sonnier has said that he

identifies neon with the best signs in the windows of the honky-tonks around his hometown. Like the glowing sign announcing "This is it" in the window of the brothel in the movie *Blue Velvet*, neon has something tantalizingly forbidden about it. One of Sonnier's wall constructions, called *Maka-up*, includes a short piece of two-tone neon tubing whose cherry red center glows in a field of deep blueberry blue. Two-tone neon like this is obsolete, and the fact that Sonnier scavenged for it inspires the fantasy that this relic may well have graced some vanished dive.

My point is not at all that Sonnier is a regionalist, any more than Rauschenberg is. His work is defeminately con-

temporary and international, but traces of his origin add to his art still another layer of enriching allusion. Perhaps it's because these early objects point outside themselves in so many directions, while never losing their focus, that they look as fresh today as they did 20 years ago. —Stephen Elie

Vito Acconci at International with Monument

Though the three brand-new sculptures Vito Acconci showed lacked the provocative edge of his best works, they made up for it by their playful expansiveness. Each piece could as well have sat outdoors, and all exuded a confident energy. Benevolent nature, both literal and metaphorical, here took the place of Acconci's usual gritty passions—sex, politics, alienation.

For several years now, Acconci has been using function to challenge sculpture rather than using sculpture's esthetics to elaborate on function. In his most recent embodiment of a sitting implement, *Overstuffed Chair*, Acconci covered all but two small corners of a vinyl upholstered armchair with cement. Three stools, their legs cut off at varying lengths, were embedded in the seat and up the back of the chair; they made us climb and perch on a form we are used to sinking into comfortably. Like his furniture works of 1984-85, this humorous and ugly piece functioned like a familiar social object.

Landing worked as a multi-level seating structure, a planter and an aquarium, as well as a self-sufficient sculpture. Here three aluminum boats crashed into each other and locked into an irregular cross. The top boat, the only one left intact, was cantilevered with its stern aloft; in its bow, koi fish swam in turquoise blue water, amidst water hyacinths. Lush plants filled what remained of the bow and stern of the bottom boat. Boats look strange out of the water, stranger still indoors, and strangest of all when they become containers for what usually contains them. *Landing* offered a kind of esthetic pleasure seldom encountered in Acconci's work. Although anyone could climb in and sit by the water, the piece hardly

called for our active involvement; despite the seeming violence of its construction, *Land-ing* was playfully serene.

With *Hole in the Ground*, Acconci constructed a human scaled burrow out of a corrugated culvert running under a mound planted with grass and ferns. A thick rubber mat spilled out of the open end of the pipe onto the floor, forming a silhouetted head and neck which beckoned the viewer to slip inside the tube and lie there, head sticking out and vulnerable. Thus entered, the piece felt like a freak iron lung. Flat stones were set steplike on the sides and top of the mound so that one could walk up and over a person recumbent in the pipe. Walking over, or being walked over, was central to Acconci's strange masturbatory-fantasy piece of 1972, *Seedbed*. Here, the situation was quite different: now the viewers were the ones to shelter their fantasies in the dark, underneath the fecundity of the piled earth; but they could not escape being seen.

Whether one physically interacted with these pieces or not, the works remained concrete, kept close to us, refused to be sanctified, insisted on materials being just what they are. This was still Acconci's smart way of making arresting sculptures while resenting the sculptural art object.

—Anne Rochette
and Wade Saunders

Debby Davis at Piezo Electric

A few years ago Debby Davis was producing some of the most adventurous sculpture coming out of the Lower East Side gallery scene. She made fiberglass and polymer casts of the carcasses—whole or in part, of slaughtered animals and painted the results in oil with a freehand naturalism that seemed particularly effective precisely because it did not attempt clinical realism—indeed, it was more like a gestural expressionism applied, perversely, to "life." Davis also had a knack for displaying her work to maximum effect: a series of heads of pigs were hung on meat hooks in one instance, while, in another, casts of fetal pigs were attached by invisible means to the wall so that their arched



Installation view of John Torreano's *100 Diamonds*, 1987, mixed mediums; at Wolff.

bodies appeared to be leaping balletically through space.

Davis's recent show indicated that her subject remains constant, with some shifts in approach, and her sense of presentation strong. It is difficult work, as it always has been. From one vantage it can be seen as fitting into a tradition, largely European, of "animal art," embracing allegory and caricature on the one hand and the *nature morte/veritas* theme on the other. Yet as a whole it has not so far seemed set on an agenda of edification of any kind (she has stated, for example, that no anti-vivisectionist program is intended). That being the case we are left, instructionless, with images that constitute both the record of grisly biological fact and a word visual poetry.

Getting beyond the grisliness to the poetry, though, is the problem, and Davis doesn't make it easy. The work is both multileveled and illusive, as much about implied attitude as specific image—not only the attitude of the artist toward her subject, but our attitude toward the artist and toward ourselves as voyeurs of mortality. If the work is repellent, what does it say about the person who made it? Who would acquire work like this, and where could it be displayed? The 20th century has produced plenty of art objects which have challenged the collector's perspicacity and nerve, from Du-

champ's urinal on, and the same kind of alibiery could be at work here. And finally, of course, since it is our own sustained viewing of the work that provokes these questions at all, we must wonder at the propriety of our own fascination.

This kind of provocation makes for fascinating work, and the recent show had plenty of it. But while *Pig's Graye* was the sort of startling tableau Davis has by now accustomed us to, several of the painted objects—each a geometric form composed of the pressed bodies of toads, eels or fish—assumed a studied formal identity, even a decorative character, that is new to her work. And she's at a very tricky point here: given her content, a decorative approach would necessarily result in a larding of irony. This is a tactic Davis has avoided up to now—wisely, I think. She has also resisted slapping easy, "political" glosses on the work. The faux marbleized pigs' heads here, with their deliberate simulation of portrait busts, are nominally studies in power à la *Animal Farm*, but end up as rather ordinary jokes. The force of Davis's work rests in its straightforwardness; the group of skinned goat heads staring up from the gallery floor and the 20 eels rippling along the wall in this show would only have lost impact by going for "meaning." They didn't, and I can think of few other exam-

ples of figurative sculpture to-day more likely to stop us in our tracks than these.

—Holland Cotter

John Torreano at Wolff

One hundred diamonds were promised by the title of this show, conjuring an image of glittering excess. The actual installation, however, seemed designed to deflate any such expectations, offering instead a collection of plywood-and-pine octahedrons scattered indifferently over floor and wall like children's building blocks.

The viewer traced a path between the "gems" which ranged in size from several feet in diameter to ten inches or so and came in a variety of primary and secondary colors, natural wood tones and murky shades of blue-black. Colors and finishes varied, basic configuration did not. All conformed to the standard diamond-ring format—an eight-sided diamond shape flattened at one end and coming to a faceted point at the other. While most of the diamonds on the floor were whole, those placed at the crossing of wall and floor were cut at odd angles, creating eccentric shapes not always immediately recognizable as diamond fragments.

In what was perhaps a calculated effort to avoid comparisons with the current vogue for