

## Jeff Morris and Sarah Smith at Ampersand International Arts

Forms, symbols and colors saturate our surroundings, dominate our visual experience, and classify our landscape. At Ampersand International Arts, artists Jeff Morris and Sarah Smith chose to observe and reflect on this complex and personal process, each in a separate space and in their own style and medium. Although the artists differ greatly in method and form, the two exhibitions reveal a common outlook on our current environment.

In *Flutter*, Jeff Morris presented numerous colored pencil drawings and various sculptural and installation objects consisting primarily of plastic. The series of recent untitled drawings displays a stark contrast between areas of dense line patterns and clean white paper. They are largely inspired by both graphic tidal charts—from which Morris singled out their visual aspect and discarded their content—as well as colorful plastic bags

which float around aimlessly, creating punctuations of color within our vast landscape. By separating form from its meaning, as in the case of the charts, Morris highlights the representational function inherent to color and its ability to make an intangible entity apparent. Thus, he reinterprets and abstracts the core of his points of reference, producing lively patterns with an ambiguous intent. The colorful lines are further echoed in adjacent works such as *Slouch*, in which vibrant galvanized wire and plastic beads extend from the corner wall to the floor in a haphazard manner, unlike the controlled structure of the drawings.

In two other works, *VV* and *When Yes on N Becomes No on N*, Morris demonstrates an approach slightly different from the drawings. Rather than merely alluding to his influences, he opts to keep their original physical structure—pennant streamers and election banners on Proposition N—yet erases their entire content, leaving them white and blank. In so doing, he has stripped them of their essence, transforming them from catchy and gripping objects to insipid and bare ones. They are now tabula rasa (in a pris-

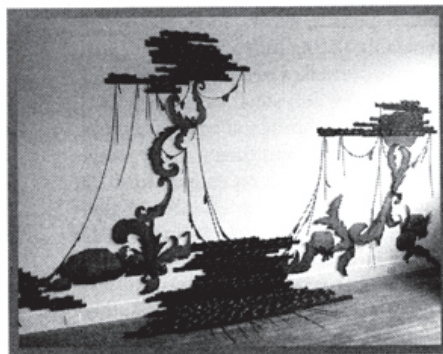
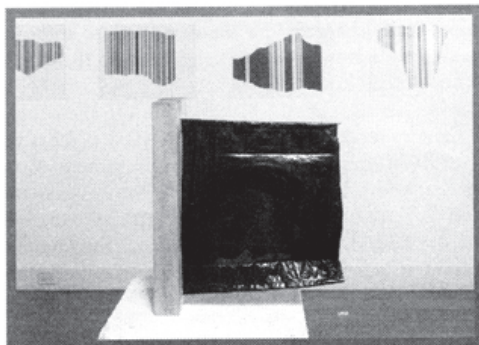
tine state)—a new surface onto which we can pour our own objectives, language and symbols. Thus, in both his drawings and installation works, Morris maintains a physical facet of their reference point, yet obliterates its defining factor and original intent, allowing a new meaning to emerge.

In the adjacent gallery, Sarah Smith created a wooden wall installation, *Notwithstanding*, as well as several large untitled drawings in solemn sepia tones and accents of gold corroded with acid. Smith generally constructs her works upon symbols of nostalgia which evoke familiar sensations and emotions. Culturally- and historically-loaded motifs such as acanthus leaves, friezes, Doric capitals and fierce animals, are recycled and juxtaposed with images of desolation—truncated trees, chains or broken branches. Rather than emitting their typical sense of authority and grandeur, they appear scattered and defeated—the product of a rude awakening and disillusionment.

These symbols function as triggers to an immersive emotional process in the viewer; they conjure up personal and collective knowledge embedded in our cultural identity, enabling us to experience the works as participants rather than

mere bystanders. Smith's distressing context and somber palette redefine the essence of the symbols—at once evoking a sense of longing and the pain of loss.

Similar to the manner in



Top: Jeff Morris, *Untitled*, 2006, colored pencil on paper (wall); *BP Monument*, 2007, plastic bags, wire, wood (foreground); bottom: Sarah Smith, *Notwithstanding*, 2007, acrylic on wood, 7' x 26' x 2', at Ampersand International Arts, San Francisco.

which Morris stripped his works of their original context, Smith altered the emblems' significance, in turn voiding them of the mystery in which they are habitually shrouded. Both artists appear to be searching for a middle ground in

the lineage of an object or symbol: Although it carries remnants of its original form and intent, it is in the midst of a process of transformation or dissolution. It is our collective knowledge, personal associations and instinctual reactions to elements such as color which enable the construction of a new identity—a fresh start from which to recommence this intricate cycle of image making.

—Yaelle Amir

Jeff Morris: *Flutter* and Sarah Smith: *Notwithstanding* closed in March at Ampersand International Arts, San Francisco.

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