

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

D-L Alvarez at Derek Eller

D-L Alvarez's first New York solo exhibition, titled "Knights Gathering Flowers," presented a series of 11 works that depict various scenes of nature as blank paint-by-number drawings. Delicately outlined in sky-blue colored pencil and rendered with the diagrammatic precision of scientific illustration, the detailed images—which include a bird perched in a bush, spiders clinging to a web and a snake wrapped around a tree—evoke a Darwinian sense of order, until one reads the adjoining legends. The numbers on the drawings correspond not to colors that instruct would-be painters, but descriptive phrases such as "swollen purple lips," "smell of water (and sorrow)," "virgins," "drug-induced slumber" and "lace of flies."



Creating a strangely engaging sense of wonderment, Alvarez's illogical directives (how does one fill an area in with "truth," or "invisible machines?") bring to mind Yoko Ono's instruction paintings of the early 1960s, which similarly questioned constructions of the real. But whereas Ono sought in each work to isolate a singular sensory experience or paradox for contemplation, Alvarez overwhelms the viewer with numerous disparate verbal images, inducing a kind of sensual delirium.

References to the body and sex surface in most of Alvarez's work, and these references seem to derive from the artist's desire to create a conceptual nexus between representations of nature and notions of gay identity. Another series in the exhibition, "Prima-Facie," consists of two long rows of small sheets of vellum. Pressed underneath each sheet is a small handmade flower, collaged from magazine cutouts. The exquisitely factored flowers are convincingly real; each is as distinct in form as the spiderwebs Alvarez has finely etched onto the vellum.

Such formal nuances inevitably draw the viewer closer to the work's translucent surface where, under the flowers, one discovers pages from a 1913 book titled *Walt Whitman's Anomaly* by W.C. Rivers. A technical treatise relating Whitman's sexuality to his artistic "genius," the book was intended for members of the legal and medical profession. Visible bits of text discuss "male inverts" and "psychic hermaphroditism," revealing an extreme homophobia wrapped in the guise of objective science.

Alvarez's approach is remarkably subtle and complex. Rather than attempt to assert the naturalness of homosexuality, he seeks instead to denaturalize nature itself, bypassing the politically charged nature/nurture polemic. He creates suggestive, often ambiguous imagery, diverse in both content and form. The result is a compelling, sophisticated body of work, unusual for its visual and conceptual savvy. —Jane Harris

D-L Alvarez: *During Tragedy*, 1998, blue pencil, graphite on paper, 20 x by 26 inches; at Derek Eller.