

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Damien Loeb at Mary Boone

There are intriguing similarities between detective writer Raymond Chandler's prose and Damien Loeb's recent grouping of cinematic, wide-format oil paintings. Chandler, in his L.A.-based stories, tinges his meticulously described, rather mundane scenes with a sense of imminent danger and conveys an underlying message that moral order has gone awry. Loeb, in the best of his six 14-foot-long narrative works, creates similarly heightened realist settings where an ominous mood emerges from a few off-beat elements.

In the tightly rendered depiction of a cheesy motel parking lot at night, the long horizontal format of *I Hear the Word of the Lord* (*Public Domain*), 2000-01, forces the eye to travel, panning like a camera, past an empty, illuminated swimming pool, past a group of spindly trees, and

finally to a 1950s sedan in the far corner, its headlights shining toward a closed door in the complex. One intuits unseemly goings-on, something about to happen. Another canvas, *Exit* (*You Accept Your Fate*), 2000, portrays a placid airplane cabin during a night flight. Passengers sit facing forward; the perspective directs the viewer's eye straight toward a small illuminated exit sign above an emergency door, conveying more than a hint of impending doom.

This narrative finesse marks a leap forward for the artist, whose previous works often came across as heavy-handed and obvious, virtually pummeling the viewer with "drama." With some of his earlier work, Loeb gained press attention (and some legal difficulties) for using published photographs without permission, which he would then duplicate and combine in seamless fashion with other images in sometimes shocking tableaux. In this

recent exhibition, titled "Public Domain" (get it?), portions of the paintings used films for the source, although their origins are not immediately identifiable. At times however, these tableaux border on cliché--as with a nocturnal scene of a man in a trench coat rushing furtively through a graveyard. In another work, a hotel bedroom next to a blindingly lit antiseptic bathroom is the setting for Edward Hopperesque desolation, with a woman sitting half dressed on the bed. As an added touch, one catches a glimpse of another person through a cracked-open door--perhaps a lover making a quick exit.

In the gallery's adjoining back room were small ancillary canvases--"outtakes," as it were--corresponding to the larger works. These are effective paintings, whose seemingly unintended subtext is the degree to which "reality" nowadays is shaped by secondhand images.

-Carey Lovelace

Damien Loeb: *I Hear the Word of the Lord* (*Public Domain*), 2000-01, oil on linen, 36 by 162 inches; at Mary Boone.

