

Art in America

May 2001

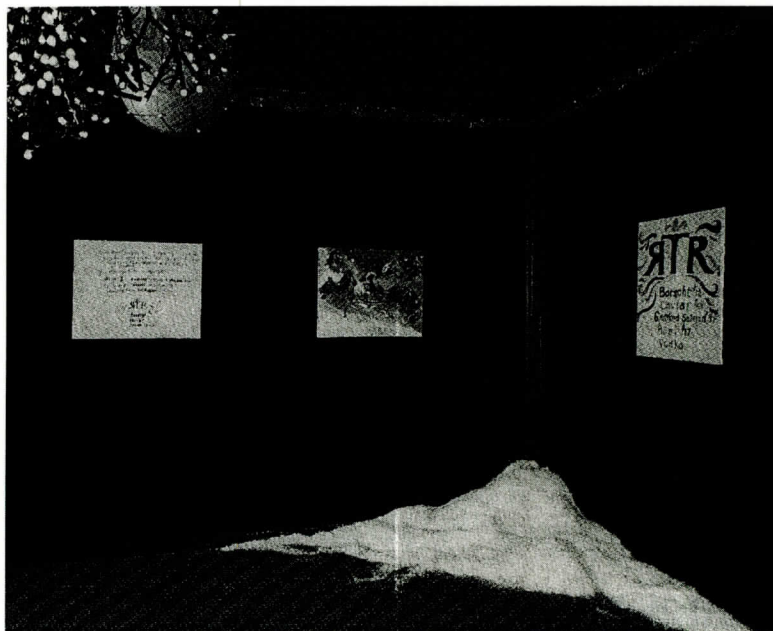
REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Karen Kilimnik at 303

The song "Let It Snow" played Muzak-sweet; in a corner was a drift of fake snow. It was a winter wonderland when Karen Kilimnik launched her sixth solo show as a raid into the fevered psyche of the preteen girl. The artist always seems to be in love—with supermodels like Kate Moss or TV series like *Bewitched*. The main infatuation this time was with ballet. Kilimnik lined gallery walls with black velvet and filled them with dance-related paintings, mixed-medium works on paper and eccentric dioramas. Fantasy elements from *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, dance history and Kilimnik's own inner life intertwined in idiosyncratic combinations, sometimes shamelessly illustrational, other times executed with faux-naive awkwardness.

The greeting-card-like oil painting *Gelsey Stuck on the Matterhorn* depicts ballerina Gelsey Kirkland as a doe-eyed fraulein on a snowy peak. More primitivistic, *My Pony Arriving to Pick Me Up at the Glitter Theatre after Giselle, 1841, Paris, Now the Palais Garnier* consists of a carriage horse rearing in front of an ornate building done in glitter on drawing paper.

During a London trip, Kilimnik photographed the Kirov Ballet backstage. Tiny cutouts of the troupe's dancers, clad in swirling frosting, populate two box-shaped dioramas in scenes from imaginary ballets. The same figures seemed to drift through the exhibition—reappearing, for example, in the charming, small *Excelsior, Act II*,



Karen Kilimnik: Installation view of exhibition, 2001; at 303.

The Queen of the Night, in which a Kirov ballerina, with stars spurring from her wand, presides over other cutout dancers afloat in a night sky.

The show presented a profusion of works not always clearly related to the ballet theme. Two Plexiglas dioramas of a boat on storm-tossed seas depicted Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated South Pole expedition of 1914. There was also a huge version of a Faberge egg hanging from the ceiling, some landscapes and many Gainsborough-style oils of figures in tights and doublets.

In a back gallery, Kilimnik recreated her 1989 installation *Hellfire Club Episode of the Avengers*.

Aging photocopy images of sleuths John Steed and Emma Peel were part of a debris field on the floor; apparent clues from a mystery plotline included a boot with pearls spilling out of it, a double-bladed toy axe and a fallen candelabra. A dusty boom box played 1960s songs and bits of garbled dialogue.

Kilimnik is best seen as a kind of raggicker sifting through the detritus of modern existence. Her ongoing scavenging project serves up cocktails of cultural memory with both confusing and delightful effects.

-Carey Lovelace