

# Art in America

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## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### William Earl Kofmehl III and Jacob Feige at Lombard-Freid

A veritable turn-of-the-century neighborhood inhabited Lombard-Freid's roomy Chelsea gallery for "At the End of the Day, We're All Sooty." It snaked around exposed wood pillars and ceiling sprinklers in an idiosyncratic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a tribute to the chimney sweep.

The installation plumbed layers of family and childhood nostalgia in the psyche of the principal collaborator, William Earl Kofmehl III. With Jacob Feige, Kofmehl constructed elaborate interconnecting rooftops and faux-brick-veneer facades exuding a glum Victorian aura. One structure, with a large window opening to the central viewing

area, was dubbed the *Middle Class House*. An adjacent workshop-like enclosure full of ropes and antique tools was the *Lower Class House*. Nearby, evoking a folkloric link between chimney sweeps and good fortune, colored panes in a *Stained Glass House* delineated a toadstool, four-leaf clover and horseshoe. Periodically, Kofmehl and Feige, as Sweeps #1 and #2, their faces ash-blackened and wearing filthy long underwear and top hats, clambered over rooftops and wriggled through windows, puffing on pipes and pushing long-handled wire brushes through various orifices, all amid warbling Alpine vocal music.

During the 2002 Carnegie International, when he was still an undergrad, Kofmehl, dressed as a lobster, built and occupied a house in the middle of his hometown, Pittsburgh. This garnered him CNN coverage, some local disdain and a scholarship to Yale's MFA program. His rust-belt hometown—in particular its German heritage—was his wellspring here, too. The back ledge in the *Middle Class House* was lined with diminutive beer kegs. Saxon incense burners known as Raucher men were models for three cast-bronze, half-human-size chimney sweeps sporting top hats and "smoking" pipes; they populated various corners like cheery leprechauns.

For the opening performance, a Narrator intoned bits of poetry related to chimney sweeps and a Woodcarver used real wood-turning equipment to carve pipes worthy of being puffed. Other activities included dragging people around, shouting and eating stew. Even Kofmehl's father, a retired military man, was enlisted

in the (loosely scripted, opaque) act, playing the Master Sweep.

In all, a kind of creative horror vacui infected this Black Forest-immigrant extravaganza. Needlepoint contributed by Kofmehl's sister, featuring chimney-sweep mottoes, hung on one wall. A video monitor was installed in a chimney flue. There were slide projections. Tables and chairs were transformed into sculpture, with geometrically distorted angles and modifications, such as a leg morphing into an inverted horseshoe.

An admirer of Chris Burden's endurance pieces, Kofmehl, whose character's sub-designation was the Dormant Chimneysweep, occupied the gallery for the exhibition's duration. Like a shoemaker's elf, he engaged in industrious nocturnal activity. Gallery staff would return mornings to find things shifted around. An alcove closet was transformed into an ad hoc darkroom, a beer keg into a pinhole camera. Eight-by-ten photographs and photograms of antique tools and pipes were hung on clotheslines around the gallery.

There were echoes of the young Robert Wilson in the installation's English-Teutonic flavor and blend of sculpture, odd references and performance. And homoerotic and scatological references lurked in the spectacle of an all-male team plunging rods through sooty holes. Perhaps if the artists had pursued this a little more forcefully, they would have succeeded (as Matthew Barney can sometimes do) in transcending the fairy-tale quirkiness. Still, such unswerving originality, thoroughly off the beaten track, can certainly be admired.

—Carey Lovelace

View of William Earl Kofmehl III and Jacob Feige's exhibition "At the End of the Day, We're All Sooty," 2006; at Lombard-Freid.

