

KINZ, TILLOU + FEIGEN

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Art in Brief

By DAVID GROSZ

Magic and art share a fascination with the marvelous. The difference between the two is that art (good art, that is) becomes no less mysterious when you understand its "trick." In fact, a certain type of conceptual art becomes surprising only when the audience is in on it.

Take the work of Kim Keever. At first glance, his seven new pieces at Kinz, Tillou + Feigen look like the sort of grandiose evocations of the sublime in nature that we associate with the Hudson River School or the German Romantics. Here are dramatic landscapes suffused with improbable light: a dark purple cross of clouds covering the sun; a fiery red sunset above a gathering of windswept palms; a fallen tree heroically fording a forest stream. Each image is lofty, exaggerated, and bold - evocative of a quasi-religious melodrama hardly in keeping with our critical, ironic age. We admire such works, but assume that they are products of the past. We appreciate their craftsmanship, but move past them quickly. They seem to offer nothing new.

But if we take the time to look, we recognize the art's curious incongruities - how certain details of perspective and description are off, how the flatness of the picture plane lacks the viscous texture of paint. And then we begin to wonder.

Here is the trick to Mr. Keever's images: He begins by designing dioramas out of plaster and resin. These are placed at the base of a 100- or 200-gallon tank, which is filled with water and flooded with colored pigment and gels. A quick succession of photographs freezes the image, capturing the color and light in a way that recalls the moody skies of Romantic landscapes. Hence, the yellow glares, the peach hazes, and the purple storm clouds.

Mr. Keever does not hide his method from visitors. A wall text explains it all quite clearly. And it is essential that you read this for his art to "work." Without knowledge of his process, Mr. Keever will seem a fabricator of nostalgic derivatives; with it, he offers something more contemporary - the suggestion that the sublime once sought in nature is found today in the conceptions of imaginative artists.

Until March 10 (535 W. 20th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-929-0500).