

Creative Arts Workshop / New Haven Sam Wiener with Evangeline Tabasco: Selected Work from Five Decades

When an oversized bronze cylinder crashed through the front glass wall of Creative Arts Workshop some wondered if this was the revenge of an angry student who flunked basic sculpture class or an emissary from a clandestine NEA watchdog group who simply couldn't stand the sight of an art gallery. No, it was artist Sam Wiener taking a poke at Barnett Newman and Richard Serra in his wallop of a retrospective at Creative Arts Workshop.

Wiener, who's been skewering modernist art trends since the '50s, assembled dozens of large and small works—sculptures, paintings, collages, readymades, and heaven knows what else—all of which took aim in one way or another at the very serious world of art. He even took shots at past masters of the form like Marcel Duchamp. Wiener's sharp arrow pointed far and wide, and, unlike some less successful ironists, his work is highly crafted and accomplished.

New Haveners who have little affection for the Richard Serra arcs located in another respected local gallery took special delight in Wiener's wickedly funny *Homage to Richard Serra and the Tilted Arc* on the first floor at CAW. Serra's notorious arc-shaped steel sculptures have been the object of much derision in several U.S. cities, and some have been removed from their original sites and remain homeless. Wiener invited viewers to find homes for the pint-sized arcs he created. He included a model set (you can assemble your own arc and put it anywhere you like) and a battery operated arc that traversed a map of Connecticut in search of a resting place. He also affixed miniature arc cutouts onto photographs of various potential sites like the Grand Canyon, an Iowa cornfield, and a snug seaside harbor. Apparently, Wiener (who confesses, somewhat tastelessly, to being an "arcoholic") feels the arc can comfortably grace any site.

The second floor sported several political and art-critical works by "Evangeline Tabasco" who, it turns out, is Wiener's alter ego, in the manner of Duchamp's "Rose Sélavy." The only glimpse we were given of her was in an intriguing composite photo by Silvia Taccani, which is one half Wiener's face and one half Wiener as Evangeline (looking frightfully like Anne Mearal).

Whereas the tall, chiseled Duchamp would often appear in person and in photographs as Rose Sélavy (pronounced "c'est la vie"), Wiener's somewhat sheepish identification with cross-dressing suggests a certain lack of comfort in heels. In any event, given the current rage for gender bending in the visual and performing arts, it is interesting to see Wiener as an early practitioner of the form.

The works in the show ascribed to Tabasco included an extensive installation titled *Splendors of the Sohites* that exposed the pretenses of the Soho art scene. Here the artist "unearths" numerous articles from the "lost Sohite civilization," such as crushed beer cans, on which he proceeds to paint and place price tags.

The jibes at artists and art movements were rarely profound, but the forms he created for his playful postmodernisms were of a high quality. It's as if Wiener embodied high and low art in the same object. His *A While After Giacometti* and *Myself as the Whitney Museum* (both from 1991) were beautifully crafted bronze sculptures that say more for the artist's original gifts than their titles might suggest.

This was a unique and important show. For the uninitiated, it was a very benign and sweeping introduction to late-twentieth-century art through the eyes of a delightfully warped iconoclast. For the jaded art-goer, it was a welcome walk through a familiar terrain with a seasoned and very talented host.

—Michael Rush