

ART + TEXT

LINDA BESEMER

RICHARD HELLER GALLERY, LOS ANGELES
FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 23, 1996

REVIEWS



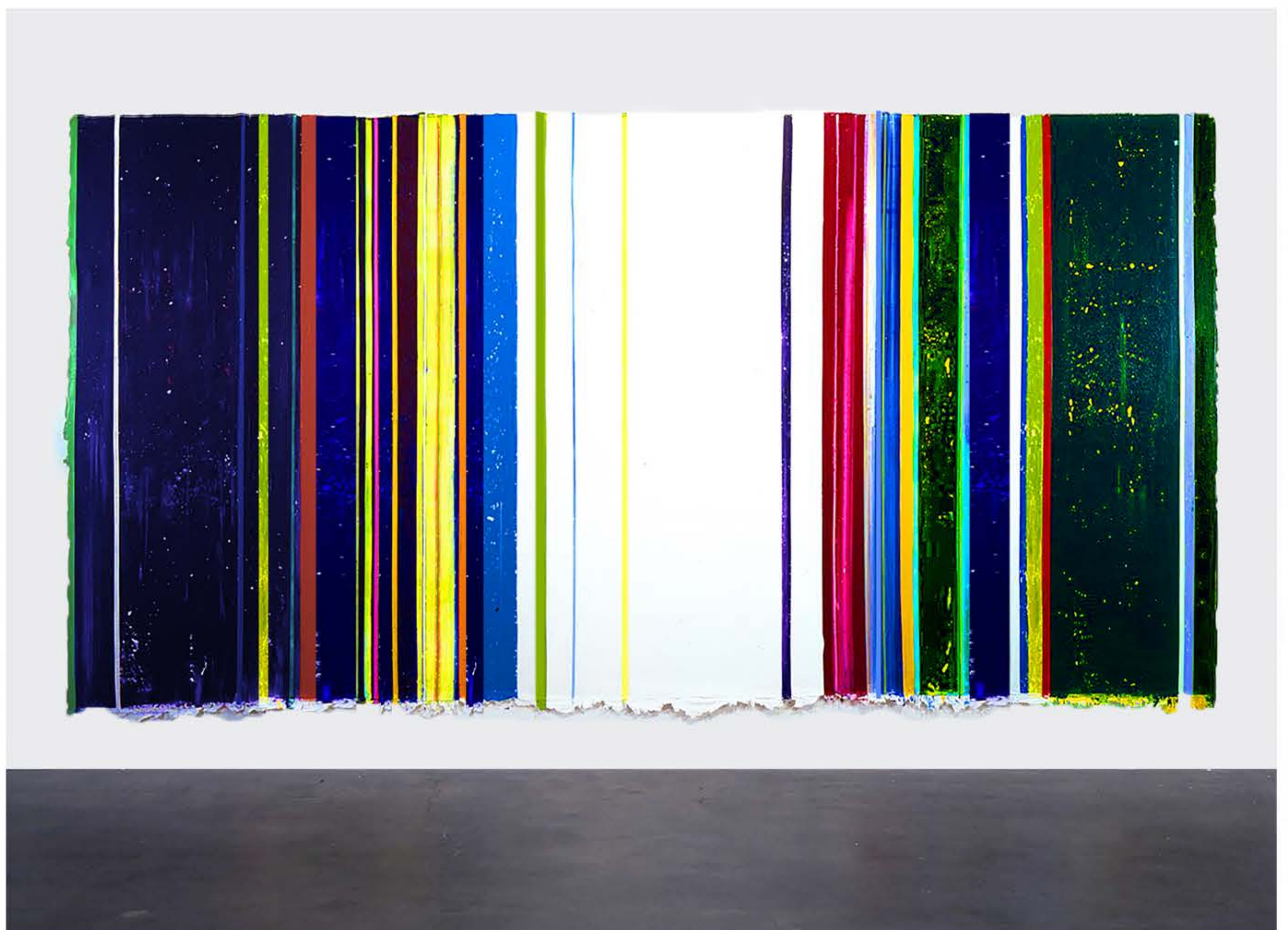
LINDA BESEMER, *LOVE CANAL*, 1996.

the syncopations of glamour, its deconstruction and simultaneous reconstruction in a cacophony of registers.

Once the dialectics of the show begins to be felt in this way, its resonances only multiply. Anyone familiar with the American avant-garde will find great pleasure in Peter Kubelka's room, with his score for Arnulf Rainer and actual films pinned on the walls like soft sculptures. Anyone familiar with the avant-garde's contested histories will relish the irony in the fact that the space next to Kubelka's room has been assigned to Carolee Schneemann—an artist anathematized for many years by Kubelka's camp—while above it playing continuously is Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966)—a controversial rival to Kubelka's aesthetic. Again, as in the small theater that has been placed at the exhibition's center, I watched Schneemann's *Fuses* (1965), its silent utopian eroticism played out to the sounds of, on one side, the mechanical counting of Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), and on the other, musical crescendos from scary movies; the juxtapositions couldn't have been more inappropriate—or more rewarding.

Cinema provides endless principles upon which its relations with art could be schematized: the illusion of movement; its technological basis; the size and number of its images which create a virtual ontological gap between the people it features and those who watch them; and so on. Any of these could subtend its own exhibition, and Brougher recognizes most. But here the dominant principle is montage; it informs what appears as the most crucial work—and appropriately the figures who dominate the show are Andy Warhol and John Baldessari (again the NY/LA axis). But montage—recontextualization and editing—not only characterizes the show's logic, it produces its architecture. Brougher's juggernaut may be Hollywood, but Eisenstein is his cynosure; his *Hall of Mirrors* is a *Montage of Attractions*.

DAVID JAMES



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A good deal of the frisson generated by Linda Besemer's seven acrylic paintings in her show at Richard Heller derives from what in the old days used to be referred to as "truth to materials," a concept whose hardening into minimalist dogma gave the impetus to an entire herd of eighties' "maximalists" who launched their careers by making a spectacle of its desecration. Now that it has been trampled into the ground, it seems to have regained the suppleness necessary to permit fresh revelations.

By using acrylic in such a way as to take advantage of the material's tough plastic properties, Besemer brings the viewer up against a Barthesian phenomenon: the lag between innovations in visual technology and their emancipation from the conventions established around earlier technologies. In the case of photography, this emancipation required the relinquishing of the ambition to make photographs look like paintings. Likewise, Besemer's paintings achieve surprise by relinquishing the long-standing, if misguided, practice of using acrylic paint to mimic oil paint.

The way Besemer "declares" her

material is by producing paintings that consist entirely of skinned paint. The paint is applied thickly on a glass or plastic substrate, allowed to dry, peeled off, and mounted directly on the gallery walls, where the paintings stay put with the aid of atmospheric pressure and nothing else.

The two titled paintings in the show, *Love Canal* and *Mio Bambino Caro*, are both large rectangular, striped compositions measuring eight by sixteen feet. The other five are all circular targets, 30 inches in diameter; in effect, stripe paintings in the round. The accumulation of pigment along the bottom edge of the rectangles and the "radar-sweep" appearance of the targets reveals that the paint was dragged rather than applied with a brush. Small tears in the paint film recall the facture of Gerhard Richter's dragged abstractions. Composition is achieved through color contrasts and variation in the width of the stripes, which, in the rectangular paintings, are grouped together with a greater complexity of rhythm than in the more constricted circular ones. Besemer's palette seems to be biased toward acrid greens, magenta, orange, and electric shades of blue—all, as it were, "plastic" colors, and therefore particularly apt.

What is admirable about these works is the way they revel in the

abused notion of beauty being only skin deep. By contrast with the Abstract Expressionists, Besemer gets her kicks from fetishizing abstraction's lack of content, as opposed to agonizing over the lack and then presenting the agony as surrogate content. It would seem that implicit in this stance is the recognition that the "death of painting," its inability to continue functioning (or claiming to function) as the vernacular of visual representation, is actually the precondition for the possibility of abstraction, which exploits painting's inertness to aestheticize its grammar—rather like conjugating Latin verbs for the sound of it.

Just over a hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde remarked that art is "superbly sterile," a phrase which succinctly expresses the inherent queerness of aestheticism, but which also gives a name to the condition abstraction has, throughout its history, labored so mightily to avoid. The bugaboo has always been "decoration," underneath which it is not difficult to discern a horror of effeminacy. It was a horror which drove the Abstract Expressionists to ultimately unsustainable extremes of compensation. The "impersonality" of the sort of abstraction Besemer practices has the virtue of relinquishing the hopeless attempt to deny, through

sheer expressionist frenzy, the close connection between abstraction and decoration. The margin that continues to separate these two categories is now as thin as Besemer's painterly membranes. It really amounts to nothing more than a "conceptual" conceit, the last narcissistic evasion of the needlessly humiliating fact that art earns its bread by giving pleasure.

MARIO CUTAJAR

TIFFANIE MORROW

NEWSPACE GALLERY, LOS ANGELES
MARCH 19 - APRIL 20, 1996

Tiffanie Morrow's elusive sculptures pit the fastidiousness of the miniaturist against the grand ambitions of an urban planner. Charged by these antithetical impulses, the L.A.-based artist's reticent configurations of canvas, wood, and acrylic quietly contend that art's job is to deal with extremes, even (or especially) when it appears to be middle-of-the-road: safely formal, cautiously well-behaved, and respectfully understated.

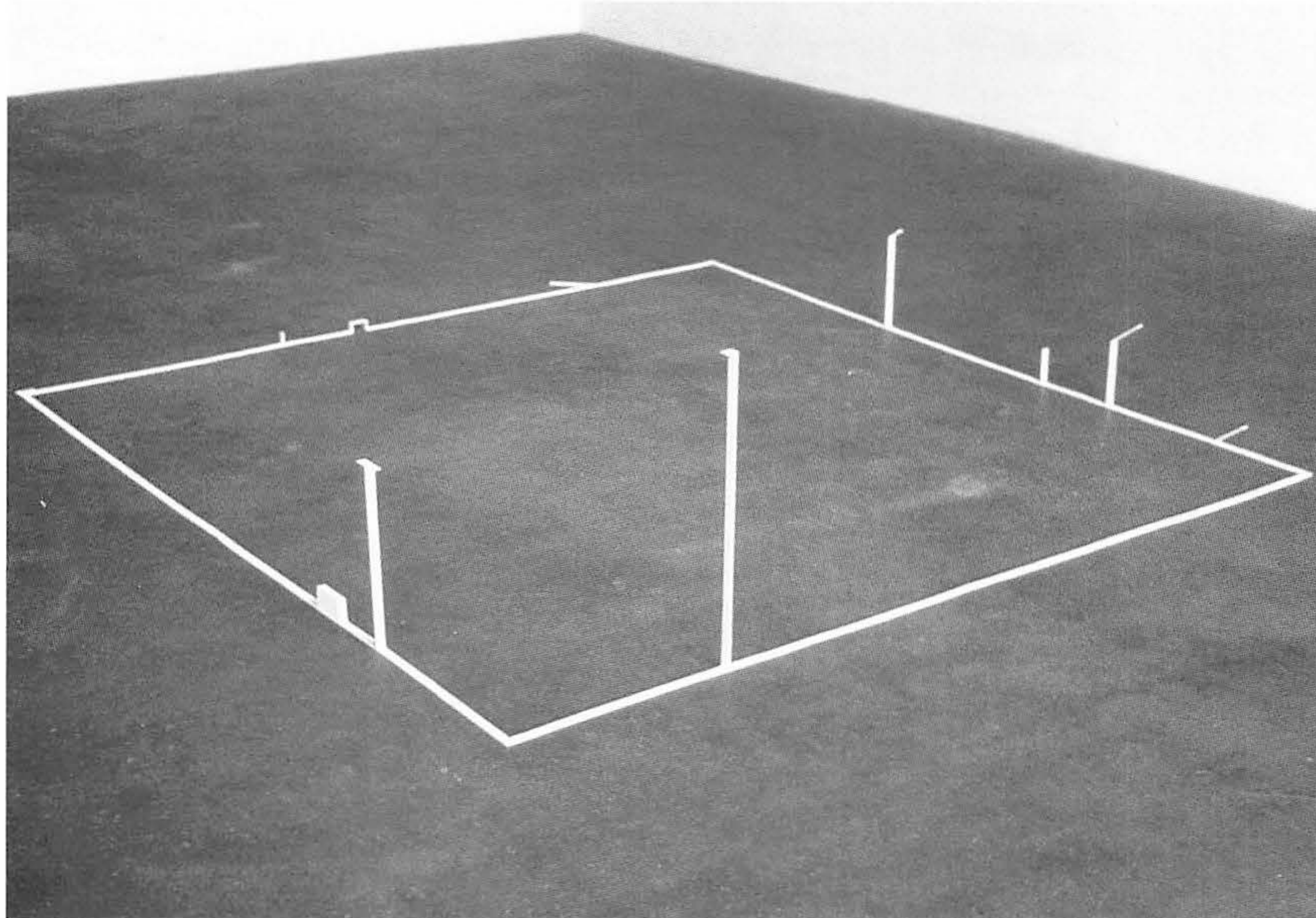
Like architectural models made from foam core and cardboard (in which myriad details are eliminated to provide clients with a streamlined, bird's-eye view of the whole), Morrow's

geometric structures effortlessly compress feet into millimeters. Your imagination does not have to make any great leaps to see entire cityscapes in the artist's wall-mounted works, none of which measures more than 4.25 inches on a side. Each of these pieces consists of a shelflike platform attached to the wall, from which extend tiny rectangular skyscrapers, and tinier multistory buildings. Flat green areas on the ground suggest the presence of parks; straight graphite lines seem to demarcate property boundaries; and gated walls appear to regulate the flow of traffic.

The comparison to architectural models, however, begins to wear thin when you notice how meticulously Morrow has crafted her abstract representations. Uniformly covered with dense layers of flat black or dull-white acrylic, every surface of each piece has been impeccably finished—painted and sanded and painted repeatedly to give it a rich, sensual depth more common to monochrome paintings than to utilitarian architectural props. Seamlessly joined to the platforms that support them, Morrow's sugar-cube-size buildings never appear to be glued on, but seem to emerge out of their bases, like fluidly shifting bar graphs on the screens of computers programmed to track ongoing market fluctuations.

The comparison to architectural models breaks down completely when you look underneath Morrow's pieces and discover a world of similar upside-down cities clinging to the bottoms of the bases like miniature stalactites. Built with the same jeweler's precision or modeler's love of detail for its own sake that characterizes the upright cityscapes, these underworld versions endow Morrow's art with an Alice-in-Wonderland, though-the-looking-glass feel. Oddly self-sufficient, her diminutive sculptures refer back to their own formal structures as much as they represent imaginary plans for possible developments in actual cities. The topsy-turvy world they inhabit mirrors contemporary urban reality, in which skyscrapers and microchips are linked in our minds, despite whiplash shifts in scale.

Morrow's most ambitious works



TIFFANIE MORROW, UNTITLED, 1995.