

Art Forum: 'Mark Hagen', by Andrew Berardini, November 09, 2007

Mark Hagen

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10.20.07-11.17.07 *Mandrake*

Though this is only Mark Hagen's second solo show, each group of artworks presented in the Mandrake's back room seems pulled from separate phases of a robust career. This inchoate diversity is evidence that the thoughts made manifest in what's on view are still forming in the fiery furnace of this young artist's imagination. After passing through the bar, one first encounters four paintings, three of which depict found documents: Scientology's "Genesis" document, wherein L. Ron Hubbard describes the alien civilization that founded the human race ninety billion years ago with an atomic bomb, a eugenics flyer from the 1930s that describes "The Triangle of Life," and a cease-and-desist proclamation, written in the thick scrawl of a schizophrenic and addressed to the "psychic underworld." These moments of hysteria, though, are overshadowed by the show's centerpiece, a quietly invasive acoustic-tile ceiling dotted with the kind of seizure-inducing fluorescent lights commonly found in office buildings. Yet the stains normally found in the more dilapidated examples of this middle-management aesthetic are here rendered in Technicolor-bright ink. Hovering in the once-ambiguous territory between sculpture and weaponry, a number of hand-carved obsidian spear points and arrowheads are mounted on board and hung on the rear wall. Their earthiness is echoed by the three plants—coffee, tea, tobacco—installed on the bar's back patio. In these richly disparate works, one can intuit a set of complex and fascinating ideas about the origins of differing kinds of madness and how they lead to beliefs as extreme as those in extraterrestrials and in the benefits of intervening in human evolution. Hagen's catalogue of breakdowns, breakthroughs, and leakages allows a peek into what an expressive artistic practice looks like in a post-Conceptual era.