

h a i m s t e i n b a c h ' s w i l d ,



John Ford, *The Searchers* (detail), 1956. Photo: Bettmann Archive.

GERMANO CELANT

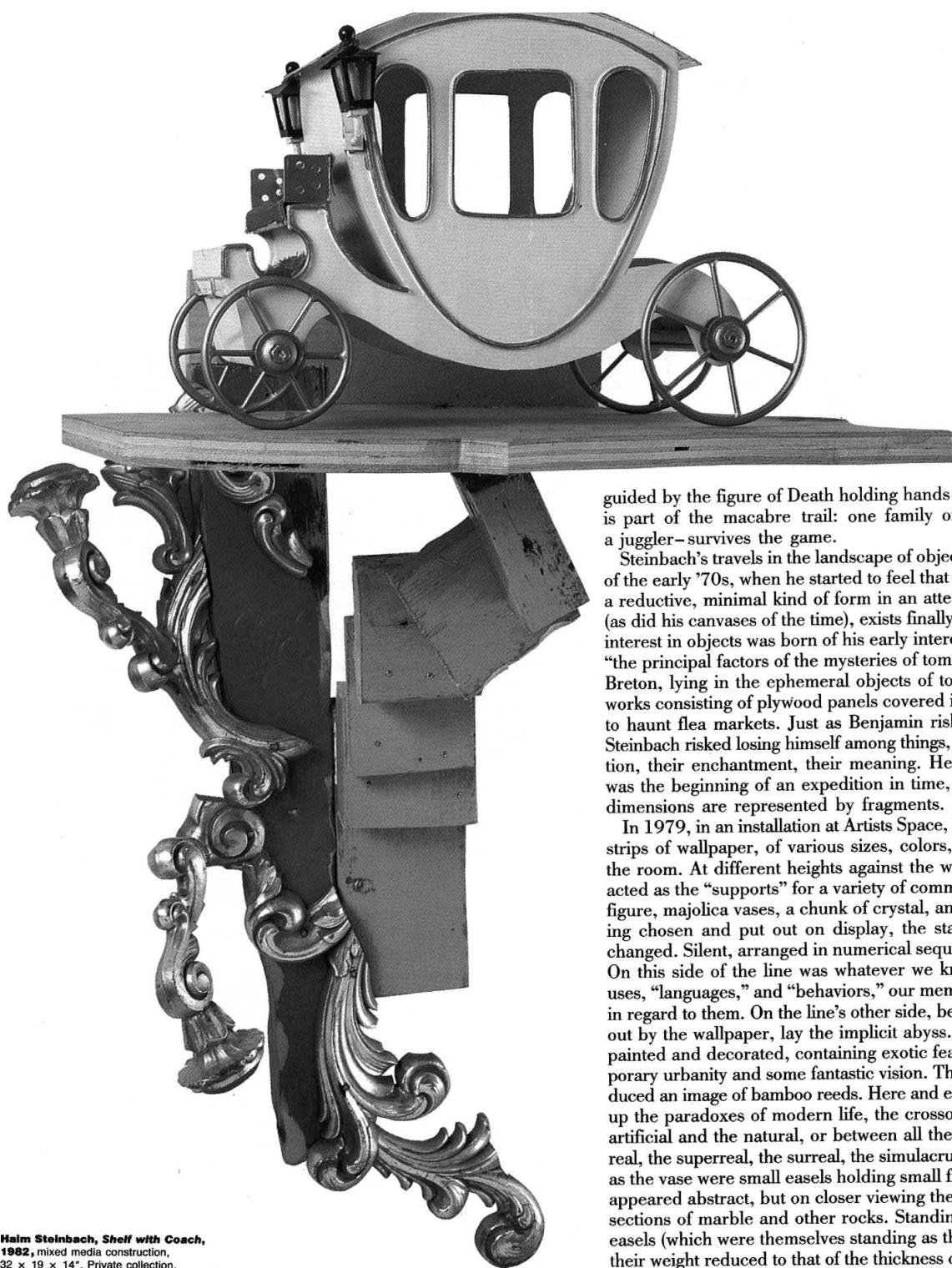
The elements that Haim Steinbach chooses for incorporation in his art most often come from the field of the mass-produced object, a flat field in which very little distinguishes itself from anything else and even less has a permanent place. Destined to vanish, these objects are the mysterious sphinxes of our culture. Steinbach has found them in the mazes and seas of stuff that constitute the supermarket, in the wild landscapes of the antique shop, the forests of the flea market. Following the Duchampian tradition, he individuates elements with his gaze, extracting them from the magmatic mass of every other serially produced object, pulling them from the precariousness of their indistinctness. The objects are prevented from evanescence, kept—by both the fact that they have been picked out and by the fact of our attention—on this side of the shadow line beyond which they would otherwise fall into an endless vertigo, into oblivion. Steinbach takes possession of them, working with the threat of their transience, turning it around till he achieves cultural artifacts. He uses the simple but perfect device of the shelf on a number of levels to symbolize and catalyze the issue of memory.

Steinbach, who came to America from Israel in 1957, at the age of 13, shares with many others the disorienting experience of being torn away from the ancient house of his own culture. Like some of these—in Steinbach's case, Walter Benjamin and Primo Levi come to mind—with the outsider's uninured view, he has been able to discover languages and meanings in the alien environment's apparent disorder and confusion, chaos and abyss. Steinbach's plunge into America's universe of "things" is the anchor he has used for his journey in the "new world." Threatened with a fluctuating existence lived back and forth along the border between being and nothingness, appearance and invisibility, these material objects hold within their mundane image the sense of how worlds are constructed and how our sense of borders casts our world view. Possessions are also registers of the layers of time, of the lives of the people through whose hands they pass, people themselves passing from infancy to maturity to old age. In the course of one's life a possession can take on different characters, moving in and out of concreteness, mystery, fantasy, the troubling, the reassuring. Together, possessions compose masks or portraits of whoever has used them, enjoyed them, lived with them, whatever that person's taste or background. In the techniques of their making and in their esthetic quality, whatever that may be, they are the repositories of social epics, the maps of human beliefs, necessities, and explorations. They are impulses from our nerve systems,

both human and social, made concrete. For Steinbach, to save those things—whose experience of time is so fragmented and partial—from disappearance, from nonbeing, is to record and define something about not only an individual's or a culture's time (and not just with industrial things; for example, ancient articles too), but also the pulsing seismic waves of taste and class.

A Steinbach work usually consists of a number of objects (though it can be only one) lined up in a progression on a shelf of the artist's own design. The form of the shelf changes from work to work; sometimes, too, there is a backdrop of some material applied to the wall, and sometimes a shelf is accompanied by freestanding objects elsewhere in the space. The objects themselves, a horizon of presences that emerge as humanlike characters, range from the elegant to the vulgar, the cold to the sensual, the elite to the cheap, the mobile to the static, the dull to the glittering—a steel kettle, shoes, a skull-shaped cookie jar, earthenware pots, teddy bears. Wrenched from the usual gray, indifferent, anonymous existence that they live in the world, their physiologies and physiognomies are "revealed," or, rather, "staged," in tableaux that remind one of sunset/sunrise landscapes. The fog that threatened them has been beaten and their passivity has been exchanged for action. They have become images, flashing suddenly outside the indeterminate magma of products and relics, distinguishing themselves. Removed as they are from their other lives, the lives for which they were made, the objects are now engaged in a process of initiation and mythicization through their location in another life, in art. The confusion Steinbach establishes between the lives of these things as real objects and as representations in art conveys a metaphysical vision in which the double—the "real" and the "simulacrum"—and the dialectical are constants.

Steinbach's combinations and recombinations of objects are based not only on the objects' shapes, and the associations they carry, but also on numerical relationships. The artist is very aware of mathematics, inflecting it as much intuitively as rationally. In a way, his work reminds one of the game of dominoes. The game is an uneasy one, for its foundation is an awareness that while these objects may seem central in the human experience today, they are also transient. These "figurations" of ordered objects move about between light and shadow, sacrifice and myth. Their potential plunge into indistinctness—into an aspect of contemporary reality—is so powerful precisely because they are condemned to impermanence, to a journey like that of the knight who plays chess with Death in Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*, 1957, which ends with a procession of human phantoms



Haim Steinbach, Shelf with Coach,
1982, mixed media construction,
32 x 19 x 14". Private collection.

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guided by the figure of Death holding hands with the knight. Not everyone is part of the macabre trail: one family of actors—the father a clown, a juggler—survives the game.

Steinbach's travels in the landscape of objects can be traced to the climate of the early '70s, when he started to feel that a painting, even one that used a reductive, minimal kind of form in an attempt to represent the ineffable (as did his canvases of the time), exists finally as an object. And Steinbach's interest in objects was born of his early interest in Surrealism, which found "the principal factors of the mysteries of tomorrow," in the words of André Breton, lying in the ephemeral objects of today. After making a group of works consisting of plywood panels covered in linoleum, in 1978 he began to haunt flea markets. Just as Benjamin risked losing himself in the city, Steinbach risked losing himself among things, opening himself to their seduction, their enchantment, their meaning. He entered their labyrinth. This was the beginning of an expedition in time, space, and memory, as those dimensions are represented by fragments.

In 1979, in an installation at Artists Space, New York, Steinbach plastered strips of wallpaper, of various sizes, colors, and patterns, on the walls of the room. At different heights against the wallpaper, a number of shelves acted as the "supports" for a variety of common objects: a wooden Chinese figure, majolica vases, a chunk of crystal, and so forth. Simply through being chosen and put out on display, the stakes of these mundane things changed. Silent, arranged in numerical sequences, they demarcated a line. On this side of the line was whatever we know about these objects: their uses, "languages," and "behaviors," our memories, expectations, and hopes in regard to them. On the line's other side, behind the objects, and screened out by the wallpaper, lay the implicit abyss. On one shelf, a wooden vase, painted and decorated, containing exotic feathers, suggested both contemporary urbanity and some fantastic vision. The background wallpaper reproduced an image of bamboo reeds. Here and elsewhere the installation pointed up the paradoxes of modern life, the crossover, for example, between the artificial and the natural, or between all the levels of "reality"—the hyper-real, the superreal, the surreal, the simulacrum, et cetera. On the same shelf as the vase were small easels holding small framed paintings. At first, these appeared abstract, but on closer viewing they revealed themselves as cross sections of marble and other rocks. Standing as though suspended on the easels (which were themselves standing as though suspended on the shelf), their weight reduced to that of the thickness of a layer of paint, these "rocks"

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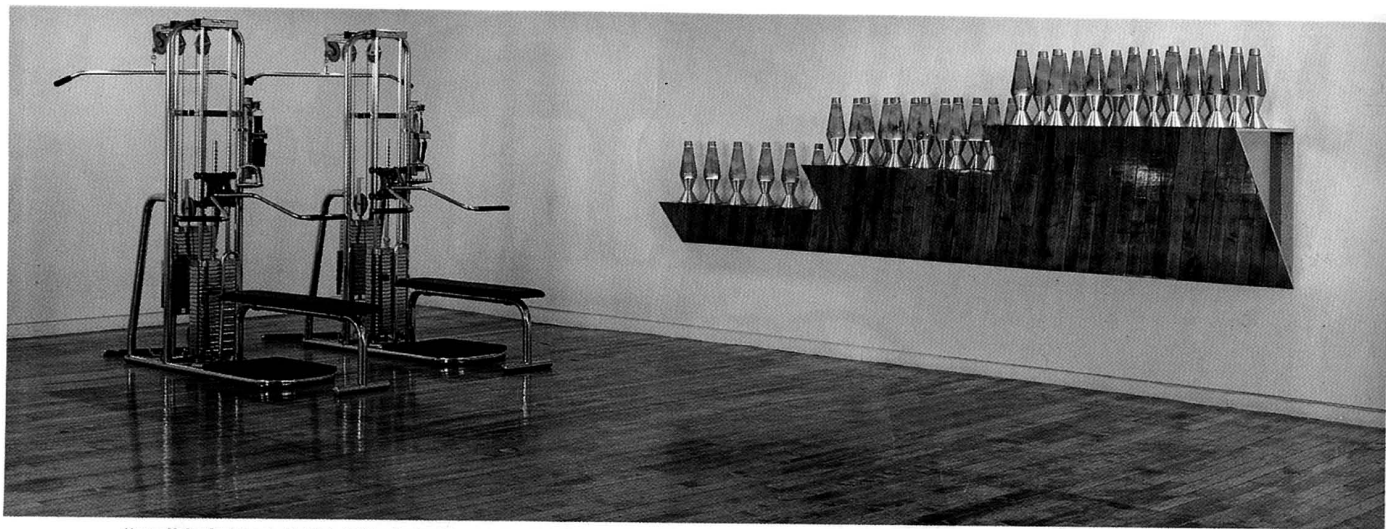
seemed to have escaped heaviness and immobility, becoming active, metaphoric. This device is typical of Steinbach. For him, mundane materials—a lunch box to which a child has stuck a collage of Mickey Mouse images; a shell, with its memory of the sea—have a spaciousness and a complexity that can absorb the vast energy of the imagination. Images and forms floated in Steinbach's Artists Space installation like colors on colors. The installation communicated a world that had not yet fallen into the inferno of millions of homeless signs, for if an object was the product of mass production, like the lunch box, it was individuated by the child's decals, as the vase was by the feathers.

One of Steinbach's early interests, when he was still a student, was the color of Cézanne. Cézanne used color to save objects and landscapes from their own inherent ephemerality; Steinbach uses objects to save color. In a sense, he remains a painter ("I do not think as a sculptor, but as a painter," he said recently), but the color he uses is sunken into objects rather than existing for its own sake. As such, its function is to capture the glance. It is inseparable from things—it is in fact conquered by them. It is a language whose vocabulary is the exaltation of the surfaces of objects, the objects of shop windows and shelves and of altars, objects voluptuous and sacral, prostituted and virginal. "I always thought in terms of surface," Steinbach has said, "of masquerading and the outdoor skin of things."

By the end of the '70s it still remained for Steinbach to reveal the energy between the object and its support, the shelf. This began to happen between 1980 and 1982, when Steinbach opened up a discourse on the horizontal support through a process of assemblage recalling, in works such as *Shelf with Globe*, 1980, and *Shelf with Noodle Shoe*, 1981, the Russian Productivists and Constructivists. He was pushing toward some sort of communication between the functional object and the object on display. This journey from one realm to another subverts the familiar hierarchy of object and background. The background or backstage is shown as the instrumental, influential zone that it is—it is as though the object and background were hugging each other in Steinbach's work. In this setlike space, the actor/object and the stage/support both work toward a vision of relationships in which the neat boundaries that we have drawn in the West for so long tend to vanish, such as our belief systems about the antithetical distinctions between unique and serial, order and disorder, original and copy, unrepeatable and repeatable. These beliefs are being challenged more and more today in contemporary thought of all fields. Steinbach shows these entities



Haim Steinbach, *Untitled*
(jugs, mugs) #1, 1987, mixed media
construction, 43¼ × 23¼ × 19".
Private collection.



Above: **Haim Steinbach, *Spirit I*, 1987**, mixed media construction, installation view. Private collection. Right: **Haim Steinbach, *basics*, 1986**, mixed media construction, 30 x 53 x 12½". Collection of Carol and Arthur Goldberg.

to be part of a puzzle, a mosaic, sustaining rather than opposing each other.

It is as though Steinbach had inserted a mirror between object and support, but a mirror that now reversed the object, now reproduced it exactly, now reflected an image quite unlike it yet obviously in some way coincidental with it. In *Shelf with Globe*, for example, there is a clear opposition between the rough, irregular assemblage of the shelf and the perfect smooth surface of the globe. But there is also a strong relationship between the two. Both are a kind of jigsaw puzzle, a whole made up of parts and fragments, the illogically shaped continents and seas of the globe combining in a cohesive unity just as the shards of wood and wallpaper in the shelf look scrambled together yet form a strong support. Just as one has begun to perceive their similarities, one remembers yet more differences: the shelf, for example, is an object of which there are literally millions, yet this one is unique, while the globe of the world—the ideal sign of the unique—is mass-produced, and even, in its capacity for rotation, its faces new and yet never new, actually represents the vortex of seriality and of mass production. And so the work continues, in a series of reflections that repeatedly fuse and confuse the object and the background. *Shelf with Noodle Shoe* also establishes a complicity between shelf and object. Here, the object is a “noodle shoe,” the product of an American folk art: dried macaroni noodles have been glued neatly onto a high-heeled shoe, which has then been painted gold. This shoe stands on a pseudo-Minimalist base, also painted gold: a small semicircular wooden shelf, its curve echoing the curves of the macaroni, supports a series of progressively larger but otherwise identical shelves, each resting on blocks that stand on the one below. The mixtures implicit here of decoration to the extreme and subverted functionalism, of “low” and “high” art, result in a kind of esthetic fever. Now fever is a strange, ambiguous state, a halfway point between mind and body. The fever in Steinbach’s work unites ideas traditionally thought of as oppositional (at least in the West). They mingle together, reciprocally inflaming each other to the point of dream and delirium—the mise-en-scène of life’s shaping energies.

Around 1983 to 1984, Steinbach began to complicate the work further by corroding the “subjective” character of the shelf, its uniqueness. Though no two of the shelves from 1984 on are identical, they are made to resemble the serially produced object. They are all wedge-shaped, based on the right-angled triangle, with an oblique face slanting down from the outer edge

of the shelf to the wall below. The first such shelf that Steinbach made is in bare plywood; the second, also in plywood, is covered in blue laminate. This latter one is closed at either end, resulting in a form so hermetic and enigmatic that the artist soon lost interest in it. The third of the shelves is again open at its ends, which helps it to declare its identity. In cross section, it reveals the variables of its structure, material, surface, construction, and volume. The shelf from here on is limited to a basic form, so that it becomes a platform that carries objects—as Manhattan carries skyscrapers. The foci of attention are the objects that stand on the shelf. The shelf’s triangular volume jutting out in space symbolically establishes a relationship between the art and the wall. The wall is the plane on which art objects so often land and lie; the shelf brings Steinbach’s objects away from the wall, but the dynamic diagonal support links the two and activates their relationship. The result is yet a further commingling of identities: an instability between painting and sculpture.

Before 1984, Steinbach’s titles generally begin “Shelf with,” as in *Shelf with Globe*; subsequently they let go of that prefix, and of its emphasis on the work’s quality of display. Instead, the titles become simple adjectives, nouns, or phrases taken from publications on design or architecture such as the magazine *House & Garden*, or a book called *All about Decorating*. Titles such as *un-color becomes alter ego*, 1984, *supremely black*, 1984, *no wires*, *no power cord*, 1986, and *common standard*, 1987, evoke a range of sources from camp to academic terminology, from glossy magazines to scholarly books. In their new context they themselves become “objects,” or objectifications of language: more artifacts. Steinbach almost always writes these titles entirely in lowercase letters; the absence of capital letters indicates a pluridimensional world, most obviously a world without a centrist perspective.

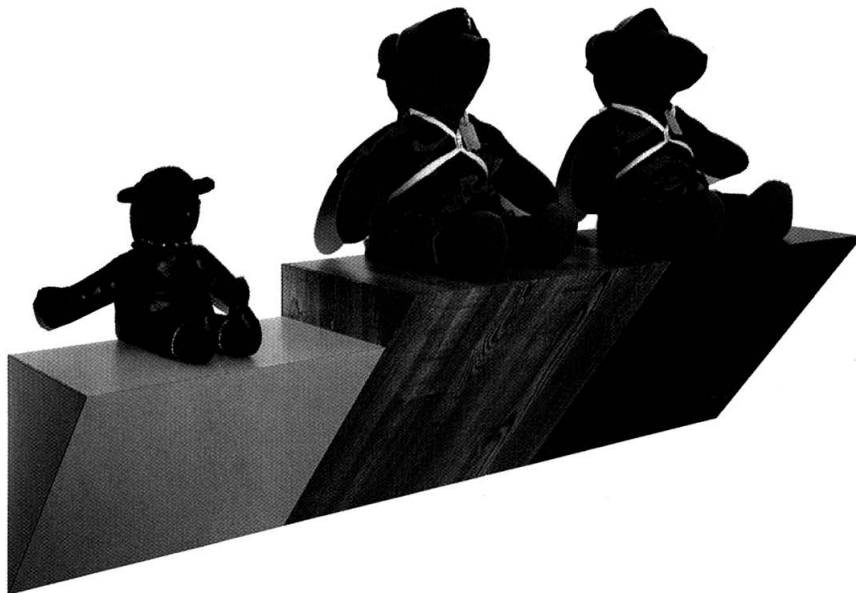
In *basics*, 1986, a confrontation emerges between three teddy bears, one made of leather, the other two wearing camouflage uniform and parachutes. Here Steinbach uses a toy, a gift, as an icon and vehicle of emotional exchange. Here and elsewhere he is concerned with both the exterior reality of his culture and its interior dream, in work that examines both the public and the private worlds, both the street and the house or room. (This is why Steinbach, since 1982, in an aspect of his work not yet exhibited anywhere, has photographed his pieces not only in the achromatic background of a gallery installation, but also in the personal contexts of the houses of friends

and relatives, as in the photograph *Shelf Arrangement for Helene, Sid, Eric, and Amy's Playroom*, New Rochelle, N.Y., 1982.) Steinbach is interested in what undulates between the visible and the invisible, as when one buys something sealed in a box: a label may have identified the contents, but they remain unseen, so that one knows what is there yet lives in a fantasy of expectation, of imagination, about it. The work called *generic black and white*, 1987, which makes analogies between ghosts and unopened cornflake boxes, is in part about this. The idea of what's hidden in the box relates to the way in which Steinbach lets difficult opposites declare their relations. Here is a recognition that there is love one can call cruelty, kindness that can be a form of violence.

The shelves in *common standard* hold a pair of men's shoes sculpted in wood, and a folk-art weather vane, the cut-out form of a horse. A link is made between man and beast, between the heaviness of the shoes, which are of course nonfunctional, and the lightness of the horse, which moves at the whim of the wind, and does a job. A confusion is set up on work and weight, mobility and freedom. In *Untitled (glove-maker, women's shoes)*, 1987, another pair of wooden shoes, this time women's (they are high-heeled), stands next to an old-fashioned device for making women's gloves. The shoes recall the Chinese practice of binding women's feet, in a crippling kind of fetishism of the feminine. And the glove-maker again refers to work, to the labor of the seamstress, and also to an object, the glove, simultaneously seductive and protective. As a machine, of a kind, from the past, it also

contributes to the sense in which all the objects in Steinbach's work are equal. In addition, they are all wrenched from their time, whether historical or current, and Steinbach does not differentiate between the ancient pottery and the mass-produced mugs of *Untitled (jugs, mugs) #1*, 1987; all are cultural goods, and all represent a type of container, whether jar or cup, even if one is made of the earth of 400 B.C. and the other of the earth of 1986.

In Steinbach's work we seem to see the artifacts of a future civilization. In his voyage, things are no longer things, but beings. The attention to and the use of the horizon in Steinbach's pieces evokes the wagon trains of the pioneers and cowboys who stand like long shadows against the western hills in the complex films of John Ford. Ford's theme in his westerns is the myth of the American frontier, and of the settlers, isolated communities struggling against a harsh terrain and climate. These communities survived through an active, committed kind of solidarity, but they also produced a dust that covered the existing life on their trails till it was unable to breathe. In Ford's films, quite disparate people find themselves bound by the same idea: the movement into unknown territory. So it is with Steinbach's work, which is made up of a sort of community of objects. Just as Ford devotes all the sophistication of his cinema to the actions of the people, and their settlement of the West, so Steinbach focuses attention on a plate, a vase, a toy, a mask, a basket. But Steinbach's characters have already settled their West—consumer society—in a long trail of dust, and so the territory he pushes toward is yet a new frontier. Like Ford's films, Steinbach's works are pervaded by a sense of frontiers and by implica-



tion of borders—the tenuous borders between myth and history, wilderness and civilization, heroes and those sacrificed. Both Ford and Steinbach convey a sense of the vastness and the indifference of both civilization and “nature,” whether that civilization or that nature is pre- or postindustrial. And both get a heroicizing effect through the use of silhouettes against the horizon, whether the horizon of sky or sun or of the blankness of the white wall. The juxtaposition of silhouette and horizon evokes not only something past, and life gone by, but also the openness of what's ahead. The horizon's line is dialectical. It also testifies to an anxiety in the face of the mysteries of both the sacred and the profane. It speaks to a world “between.”□