

ARTnews

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Jannis Kounellis

Cheim & Read

"An aged man," writes W. B. Yeats, is a "tattered coat upon a stick." Jannis Kounellis apparently agrees. Empty coats were a motif running through this splendid show. To the coats he added empty tables, shoes, beds: places once occupied by bodies but now vacant. To produce art, life must be sacrificed, and Kounellis's assemblages commemorated that paradoxical aspect of art making.

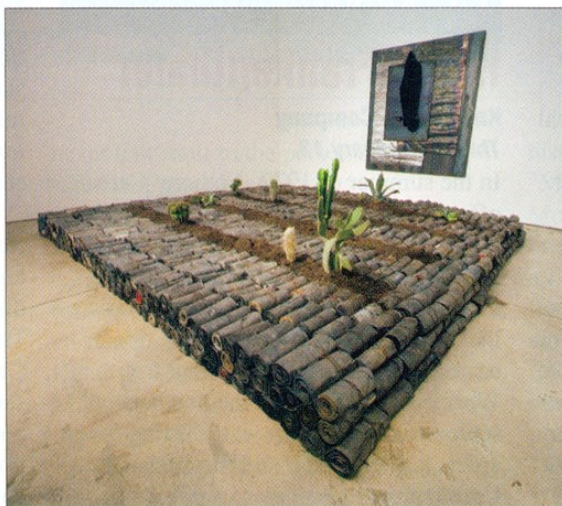
There were two kinds of work here, gatherings and constructions. Among the former was an untitled installation of 19 worn wood tables arranged in a corner of the gallery. The tables looked much like

horizontal grave markers, but their stark emptiness was broken by a large bowl of water in which swam two goldfish making their way around a meat cleaver. The sacrificial blade and the water of life met to spark a resurrection.

The idea of art as rebirth manifested itself in a major piece from 2005. Isolated in its own room, the space was transformed into a chapel. The untitled work consists of 19 rows of small loaves of rolled lead interrupted by soil beds planted with cacti. This miniature cemetery culminates in a wall plaque on which hangs an empty coat. Out of death springs the immortality of art, which in turn commemorates the loss of life. The work was moving without being sentimental, mournful without being depressing.

Kounellis never abandoned his *arte povera* roots, which are evident in his continual recycling of discarded objects. He composed the show in such a way that each of the five constructions stood alone yet complemented the others. The overarching unity contributed to the tremendous power of the ensemble. As Yeats went on to write, the "aged man is but . . . a tattered coat . . . unless a soul claps its hands and sings." Kounellis sings.

—Alfred Mac Adam



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2005, lead, earth, cacti, fragments of clothing, dimensions variable. Cheim & Read.