

SUSAN MOGUL: MOVING THE GOODS

Los Angeles

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The art world as market. It is probably we lean and hungry types, not well-established artists, who dwell on the overlap between art making and sales. This is the central focus of *Mogul's August Clearance* at the Canis Gallery in the Woman's Building, as it was of Oldenburg's *Store Days* and my own *Monumental Gar(b)age Sale*. Shows like these, while they differ widely in their particulars, seem to mark a stage in the development of the artist's consciousness and orientation. Recognizing and accepting (or rejecting) that art, like everything else in our system, has an economic base are fundamental in becoming a "professional" artist. Professionalism tends to be poorly differentiated from financial success. "Making it" means having to come to terms with yourself as a producer of consumables for sale, deciding how closely to gauge the market and gear your product to it.

Showing in a gallery, where acceptance and dollar bills are linked, effectively drives home this point. The quasi-churchly fog that blankets museum exhibitions is absent from gallery shows, and the "audience" can clearly be seen as potential "clientele." Artists may learn to despise the lookers because they need the buyers: Edward Weston railed in his journal against "idlers, parasites, curiosity seekers who patronize exhibits but only with their presence — they never buy!" Artists who have no salable product or documentation parlay their reputations into grants, teaching jobs or gallery salaries. But there is a deeper issue at hand than simply the seeking of support; it is the question of how much, in this 100% commodity culture, the *meaning* itself of the work depends on its commodity or exchange value. Billy Al Benston says, "There's a sucker born every minute — I tell people the only way to understand my work is to buy it."

Frustration with this system, coupled with a desire to take control (to move the audience toward some kind of acceptance, if not into purchasing), spur some of us to take on the role of shopkeeper, if only to prove a point. For Susan Mogul, in part because of her cultural history (New York Jew) and family history, the analogue of the art world is the retail garment industry — not bad, for as the artist divests her/himself of the work, the buyer dons it as an attribute or at least an adornment of the self. Mogul places herself near the business' lower end. Her model is Loehmann's, a "clothing outlet" that, on the one hand, allows manufacturers of expensive women's wear to clear their racks and that, on the other, allows designer-conscious middle-class women unwilling or unable to pay the normally high prices to approach the imagined glories of *haute couture*. In such a place both the status of plush surroundings and the obsequiously coercive salespeople are absent.

Mogul hangs her work — photos and photo collages — on wire hangers and puts it in bins. The logic of the producer-consumer transaction has led her to price each piece according to its degree of "finish" (shades of nineteenth century Academicism!). She arrived at a hierarchy running from "sketch," or work print, to full-scale work, in which only a finished item is seen as fully worthy of her "signature." The monetary value then is a function of the labor invested (and "self" reflected) — but the show,



SUSAN MOGUL: Installation at the Woman's Building, Los Angeles. Photo: Lilla Gilbrech.

of course, represents an attempt to capitalize on all labor invested, just as an outlet allows manufacturers and shopkeepers to recover some of their investment even from slightly damaged, shopworn or poorly selling goods.

The show casts Mogul in two roles. She controls the anxiety about success (selling, getting good reviews) by acting as the purveyor of cut-rate goods, a businessperson who bluntly proclaims that the merchandise is high-class though prices are low. But she is also the maker, whose products are on the sale racks and subject to pawing in the close-out bins, as well as enthroned in the spot reserved for "designer originals." This split allows her to sidestep the problem of choosing her "best" and "most salable" work. It also leaves unresolved her ambivalence about surrendering the innocent directness of the amateur (the willingness to reveal process rather than presenting an idealized front as, say, Alexis Smith does) for the sake of career. Mogul's pieces themselves show a similar split. Some address fame and fortune, playing on the meanings of

"mogul" with rather winsome absurdity — a TV showing Mogul trying on dresses off the rack forms the facade of the Taj Majal, for instance. (She used this image on her shopping bags.) But many are photographs of "just people," mostly women, in the company of others — at parties, in back yards, in kitchens, in the street — being social yet private.

Mogul's show is worked out clearly. Because there is neither enough work nor enough space really to simulate a clothing outlet, the exhibit becomes emblematic of an attitude. *Mogul's August Clearance* is a gentle but shamelessly insurgent attack on the fetish of the fine-art object, in a favor of a more democratized, downwardly mobile — though inevitably still class-bound — fetishism. □

Artist Martha Rosler's varied concerns include video and works involving the written word. She has also written art criticism and is completing a book to be published by Printed Matter, Inc., in early 1977.

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