
Karl Mann**'Retrospective: 50 Years'**

Viewing Room
114 West 17th Street
Manhattan
Through Sept. 15

An extraordinarily productive if not highly original maker of collages and assemblages, Karl Mann, born in 1930, arrived in New York from Chicago at 18 and had his first solo exhibition in 1955. But he never acquired the renown of the artists whose work his resembles in various ways: professional eccentrics like Jess, Bruce Connor and Alfonso Ossorio.

The self-taught Mr. Mann started out making mosaic pictures from seeds. Only one of his seed paintings, a winsome image of a white pigeon standing on a field of brown grains, is included in this 50-year retrospective. Its beguiling simplicity makes you wonder what the others in this series are like.

Some collages from the early 1960's have a combination of raw physicality and formal elegance that calls to mind Robert Rauschenberg. But Mr. Mann has generally tended toward an unabashedly flagrant surrealism. Doll fragments, wallpaper, plastic animals, Jesus, Madonna and Elvis heads, superhero toys, electric and mechanical parts, antique photographs, magazine advertisements: all this and much more go into the mix and are arranged with an unerring design sense.

Recent assemblages stretch across the wall: "Loisada," a landscapelike accumulation of scores of battered knickknacks extends horizontally more than 20 feet.

What drives Mr. Mann — other than creative energy and an indiscriminating love of flea markets — is hard to say; the tension between order and chaos, maybe. An internal editor might help to give his work a more personal focus. Nevertheless, you admire his boundless enthusiasm for making art.

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