

## Terri Friedman

at SPECIAL K EXHIBITIONS, 7 February–15 March

Terri Friedman's oddball fountains marry water with its perfect counterpart, plastic. Like the Felix Unger and Oscar Madison of materials, water and plastic have virtually nothing in common, but are forced here to accommodate one another in a comic spectacle. The liquid and plastic components in Friedman's fountains never harmonize, but instead invest one another with personality. The plastic is responsible (it holds and contains); the water looks for any way out. The plastic is compliant (allowing itself to be cast in a variety of forms); the water could care less. At the same time, though, the materials are similar in two significant ways: They're both prone to garish colorization, and they're both slick, which says a lot about Friedman's slightly trashy, slightly seedy, baubles-and-glitter aesthetic. Her work is a subversive element in the kingdom of taste.

We tend to think of good taste as just an aesthetic opiate, and bad taste, by extension, as irrelevant. Friedman apparently thinks otherwise. Taste is inseparable from the people who use and define it, which is why her art lends itself to personification and social satire. Friedman's fountains produce a sculptural comedy of manners in which human pretense is lampooned. Yet, the work also demonstrates that before you can make an issue (much less a caricature) out of this kind of affectation, you have to appreciate the standards by which society evaluates our position on the ladder of social prestige. Good taste announces a position at the top, whereas the lower rungs are reserved for those who mangle the rules. This would include the kind of person who asphyxiates you with cheap cologne, or wears brown shoes with a black suit, or digs into their entrée with the salad fork. Clearly, Friedman has a soft spot for them.

Decorative fountains are a flagrant relic of misplaced, high-falutin' pretense. The show's centerpiece cross-breeds, in no uncertain terms, the fountain with a toilet. You are alerted right away that this work, like the social misfit, doesn't mince words. It consists of a long, sagging plastic

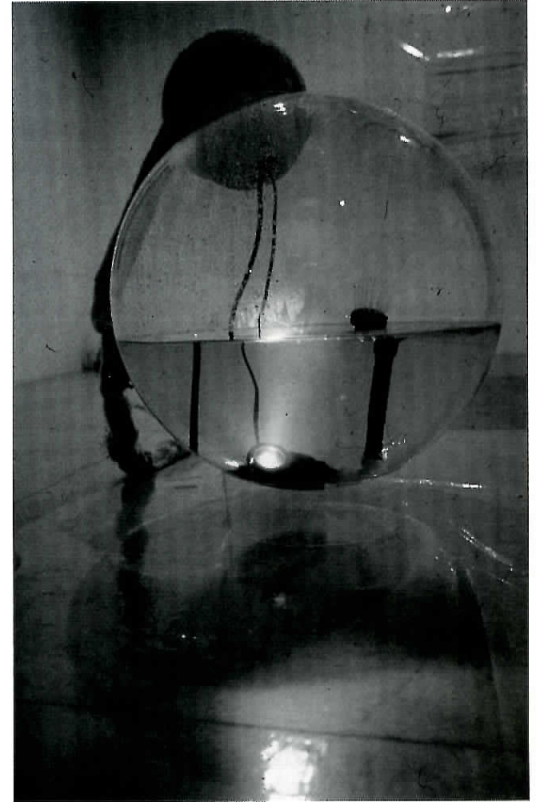
bag festooned with clamps, hardware, and tubing suspended over a huge aluminum basin. The bag alternately fills with algae-colored water, then relieves itself into the basin with a loud and conspicuously rude flush. As if that weren't enough, the whole thing also drips and leaks obnoxiously throughout the process. It is titled, tellingly, *Phew* (all works 1997).

Bathroom humor is a common weapon against social elitism, because we all know that no matter how prim and proper we may present ourselves, everybody's got to go. *Growing up in Public* reinforces the point. In this work, pumps draw orange water out of two reservoirs shaped like Mickey Mouse shoes. The water is channeled up through tubing, then allowed to cascade back down through a sheath of clear plastic sheeting. The allusion to a pissing cartoon character is puerile—but then it has to be puerile, because adolescent silliness is what makes this kind of joke effective. Friedman's bathroom humor is dressed up just enough to be admitted into dialogue with the finer things of life (namely, art), but also ridiculous enough to make fun of the whole process.

Also included are a suite of paintings on see-through sheets of acetate that have been layered one atop the other. All are decorated with brightly colored acrylic that's slathered on in streaks, flows, dots, blobs, and smears, and sometimes further ornamented with painted daisies, curlicues, or designs from a Spiro-graph. *Moist*, for example, uses a fluorescent pink pigment with shades of streaky yellow to form a mawkish rainbow on a large sheet of clear vinyl. Friedman seems determined to strip the veil off acrylic paint as an art material and take it back to its roots in the world of ersatz plastic products. The result isn't merely tacky, it's over-the-top. This work takes the norms and limits of good taste and uses them the way a kid uses playground equipment. What you end up with is all somersaults, flips, backbends, and belly flops.

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**Terri Friedman**  
*Grandma Is Pregnant*, 1997  
Plexiglas globe, water, light,  
knit hat, hat pins, pump  
Dimensions variable