

ART REVIEWS

By SUSAN KANDEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Over-the-Top: The title of Terri Friedman's new show at Sue Spaid Fine Art is like a tabloid headline from which you try to avert your eyes, but find—horrified—that you cannot.

"Sunny von Bulow is Still Alive!" Friedman fervently proclaims. At once Von Bulow's champion and a dazzlingly creative parasite, sucking what life remains out of this 14-year coma victim, Friedman displays a flair for exploitation matched only by a knack for finely festooned fussiness. Everything here is way, way over-the-top.

If Rubens chronicled the triumph of Maria de' Medici in his famous cycle of paintings, Friedman chronicles the tragi-comedy of this moribund heiress in a series of fantastic assemblages. These are gorgeous to the point of gagging, full of glitter, beads, gold leaf, mirrors and cut glass, with pink fluorescent light to perk up the gallery's ghastly pallor.

Gagging isn't a problem, of course: These pieces come fully equipped, much like the room at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in which Von Bulow has long been ensconced. Life-sustaining substances are everywhere.

These include air blown from a black-and-white striped fan into a series of black-and-white striped shopping bags, affixed to the fan by a network of artfully twisted black-and-white striped wire (an homage to the salubrious effects of shopping at Henri Bendel's); and sparkling water, an essential fluid

for those enamored of glitz, which flows through plastic tubes snaking across the floor into an oversized hospital beaker, bubbling with yet more of the glittering stuff.

In a statement that accompanies the show, Friedman describes Von Bulow as a "decorated living corpse," freshly dressed and made-up each morning. Friedman's fascination with the Von Bulow story is easily explained: It allows her an out for work that otherwise might be praised as meticulously crafted and exquisite, but rather vacant.

The gambit works, if you are willing to discount the tastelessness of it all. Certainly someone who could create "Sunny Sideways With Oxygen," which features an electrically induced sunrise, repeated rhythmically until the plug is pulled, is loath to consider anything so boring as good taste. Her shamelessness is embarrassingly seductive.

■ Sue Spaid Fine Art, 7454½ Beverly Blvd., (213) 935-6153, through Dec. 24. Closed Monday and Tuesday.