

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY 812 North Robertson Boulevard, Los Angeles 90069
Robert L. Pincus, "Jeffrey Vallance, Rosamund Felsen Gallery" (review), *Artforum*,
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JEFFREY VALLANCE, Rosamund Felsen Gallery:

Jeffrey Vallance's Connie Chung paintings, exhibited two years ago, place newscaster Chung at the center of a field of apocalyptic images, from military hardware to atomic mushrooms. The presentation, like the style of the paint-

ings, is quasi-naive. In this exhibition Vallance included likenesses of Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale mounted on green cloth, in a piece made during Carter's tenure in the White House; the painting itself is fairly nondescript, but along with portraits, Vallance displays correspondence asking for the two politicians' signatures. Here context is all—people at the White House took the fan stance seriously while for Vallance it was only a persona. Both the paintings of Chung and these "participatory" works are deadpan satire, with the artist remaining poker-faced; the humor is black, but it is difficult to resent the punchlines.

The recent series of paintings of Polynesian tikis begins as another swipe at mass culture, a recycling of the kitsch derivations of these South Seas deistic statues, which were so popular in the U.S. during the early '60s. (Tikis had become pendants, patio lamps, and such.) The early works in the series, such as *Malibu Tiki*, 1983, exploit the humorous aspects of Western cultural imperialism. In the god's original context as a carved icon he looks both fierce and sexually potent, but here he seems harmless, sheepish, even silly. And the muted, thick, brown enamel of the tiki image is set against a black-and-white fake-stone surface surrounded by the cheapest of aqua plastic frames.

But Vallance isn't content to treat only the kitsch versions of the tiki. After his return from a trip to Polynesia in July and August of 1983, the presentation changed. The tikis in the later paintings more closely resemble the look of the original carved icons and are set against one-color backgrounds. If the style is still decorative, the kitsch context is sub-

verted: even though the transplantation of the tiki statues into wall works makes them look like anthropological specimens, the pristine grounds of their settings focus one's attention on the power of the iconic image.

The documentation of our cultural dominance resurfaces in Vallance's drawings, which form an interpretive visual diary of his trip. They are assemblages of images more than documentations of specific sights and scenes, and their juxtapositions dramatize the collision of cultures: a telephone sits atop a tiki stand; a Fijian warrior is flanked by the top-hatted male silhouette on a restroom door. There is, of course, social commentary here, but the presentation is clinically styled. In part, then, Vallance functions as an observer of the Western romance with "the primitive." He traces the process by which the sacred images of one culture become the prosaic trinkets of another. Yet he participates in the romance too, moving beyond parodies of kitsch tikis to forge poignant homages to the power such icons once possessed.

—ROBERT L. PINCUS