

Myers, Holly. "Erudite panorama rewards all who see it." *Los Angeles Times*, 26 March 2004, p. E32.

REVIEWS

Erudite panorama rewards all who see it

By HOLLY MYERS
Special to The Times

Bibliophiles, especially those inclined toward scanning other people's bookshelves, will find much to relish in **Allen Ruppersberg's** "The New Five Foot Shelf and Other New Projects," his fourth solo exhibition at the Margo Leavin Gallery. Language has long been a central preoccupation of this veteran Conceptualist, but in this recent work we see that interest zeroing in on books specifically — both as physical objects, actual containers of language and as networks of ideas.

The title piece, which fills the

main gallery, consists of 44 unframed, poster-size photographs of Ruppersberg's former studio in Manhattan as well as what appears to be a set of the Harvard Classics. The 50-volume, cloth-bound series was published in 1910 by former Harvard President Charles Eliot, with the intention of condensing the basis of a respectable liberal education into 5 feet of shelf space.

The prints provide a panoramic view of a small, rather plain office piled high with papers, files, magazines, film canisters, knickknacks and, of course, books. It is a banal yet strikingly intimate self-portrait, in which every personal detail becomes a clue to the artist's character, every book a dot on an emerging map of his intellectual life. Indeed, after a look at the art, film and theory titles that predominate in the left-hand corner (Bertrand Russell, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, André Breton, etc.), the rack of pulp fiction tucked in around the middle ("The Bad Seed," "Miss Dilly Says No," "Commie Sex Trap," "The Story of My Psychoanalysis") and the older, stater volumes on the right (including what is presumably a genuine

edition of the Harvard Classics), it's tempting to think that you've come to know the artist pretty well.

As for Ruppersberg's new Harvard Classics, which are available at the gallery for perusal with gloves, they contain not Carlyle, Darwin, Voltaire, Machiavelli or Luther, as their spines promise, but five of the artist's own texts, issued at a rate of about a sentence per page through roughly the first quarter of each volume. The remaining pages are blank, with an assortment of photocopied obituaries tucked enigmatically here and there.

The texts are as compelling as they are exasperating to read in such a format. (An electronic version, which is set to launch Tuesday on the Dia Art Center's website, www.diaart.org/ruppersberg, is, fortunately, also available and much more conducive to browsing.) The most amusing text consists entirely of statements beginning with the phrase "Honey, I rearranged the collection." Succinct and consistently clever — Ruppersberg aptly referred to them as "New Yorker cartoons for the art world" when they appeared in a previous series — the statements posit the collector as a manager of various systems of meaning, not unlike the Conceptual artist.

For example: "Honey, I rearranged the collection to show only works I bought to impress you"; "to show artists who were popular in the '80s but aren't now and won't be later"; "to see if

we got our money's worth"; "because I'm looking for a good argument"; "because I was fed up with our boring life."

Another series — grouped under the title "No, Sir, This library is mine not yours. But you may have this" — expands on the notion of books as interlocking maps of ideas. In each, the same silk-screened image of a handsome domestic library is annotated in pencil with bibliographic information about dozens of books, the purported locations of which are indicated with an arrow. The genre shifts in each piece — from poetry to modern fiction to 20th century art history — suggesting multiple paths through the same seemingly unambiguous space.

What emerges in each of these works and gives the show its invigorating air of conceptual expansiveness is a fascination with the book, the shelf and the library as overlapping systems of potentially infinite complexity. Those with a penchant for bibliography surfing may find themselves lingering in its folds for quite a while.

Margo Leavin Gallery 812 N. Robertson Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 273-0603, through April 17. Closed Sundays and Mondays.