

Buckley, Annie. Review. *Artforum.com* (Critic's Picks), November 2007.

Jeffrey Vallance

11.15.07

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10.31.07-12.19.07 *Margo Leavin Gallery*



Juliet's Balcony, Verona, 2006, mixed media, 24-1/2 x 8-1/2 x 8-1/4".

In 1978, Jeffrey Vallance handwrote a letter to every US senator, requesting a drawing along with his or her ideas about art. At least one-third of the senators replied to what seems to have been perceived as a child's school project. The personalized letters that Vallance received in response, sometimes accompanied by handmade drawings or copies of paintings, are meticulously framed and hung at Margo Leavin Gallery, offering an incisive, open-ended, and powerful critique of both art and government. Half of Vallance's excellent and mind-expanding exhibition "Belief Systems," these framed letters point to an aspect of the artist's work that could be termed mischievous, were that word not indicative of juvenile pranks; for though Vallance has allowed himself, for the purposes of his art, to be mistaken for a child on occasion, the intent and the implementation of his practice are anything but naive. Playing with a nostalgic and simultaneously hopeful sense of the world as one big, happy place where everyone gets along, Vallance plucks at the tightly drawn strings of institutional power dynamics with the blithe confidence of a teenager strumming his guitar. By turning the letters into exhibition pieces, effectively inducing the government to participate in his critical, conceptual practice, Vallance affects a subtle but profound shift in power, as if reversing the flow of influence away from "them" and toward "us." Talk about power to the people.

This quality of subversion, along with a spirited desire for exchange, marks many of Vallance's previous projects, as well as the show's newer pieces. Each of the beautifully crafted sculptures in the series "Relics and Reliquaries" represents an altar of sorts, enshrining a personal item from Vallance's own life, the significance of which is described in a short typed narrative posted alongside the object. In *Orange Crush, 2006*, a decades-old broken glass bottle lies on a purple pillow in a box lined with crushed velvet; the accompanying text tells of a childhood memory in which Vallance tried to open a soda with a pair of pliers only to spill it on his entire family. *The Gods of Vegas by Vallance, 2006*, preserves rhinestone nameplates for Elvis and Jesus, among others, in another specially made reliquary. The unabashedly religious ornamentation and devotional presentation of these works set in motion several sometimes-conflicting but always-provocative lines of thought, about art as religion; memory as artifact; personal experience as prayer or, alternately, as art; and the artist as saint. By placing the anecdotal detritus of life in the position of holy relics and situating reliquaries as contemporary conceptual art, Vallance turns widely accepted notions on their heads, perhaps most powerfully evidenced by the lengthy periods viewers spend with these works. With impeccable craftsmanship and wicked

intelligence, Vallance destabilizes sacred traditions with the devout passion and clean precision of a dedicated holy man—albeit a wild mystic.