

## ART IN REVIEW

**Anni Albers, Robert Beck,  
Cady Noland, Joan Semmel,  
Nancy Shaver**

Matthew Marks Gallery

522 West 22d Street

Chelsea

Through Sept. 10

It is part of the artist's job description to suggest fresh ways of looking at the art of other artists, other times and other cultures. Artists do this most consistently in their own work, which may be the highest form of art criticism, and when they talk or write about art. But they also accomplish this by bringing together various artworks and artifacts as collectors, or when they step into the role of curator to organize an exhibition.

The sculptor Robert Gober has taken this step a few times since the late 1980's, mostly in New York galleries. Now he has done it again, in a lean, succinct grouping of works by five artists working in different media and periods.

The works are few and widely spaced. Near the door is a grim videotape by Robert Beck of his father sawing through the forehead of a dead deer to remove its antlers, the relentless sound permeating the space. On the opposite wall hangs a smallish textile in squares of gray and black by Anni Albers from 1927.

On the intervening walls are two paintings from the 1970's by Joan Semmel, each depicting a nude couple, one distinctly pre- and the other seemingly post-coital. In the center of the room stands a life-size cardboard sculpture of a stock (as in Pilgrim) by Cady Noland, painted silver as if to imitate aluminum.

A second gallery contains 15 small black-and-white photographs of children's clothing by Nancy Shaver from 1975-77. Most of it is festooned with images, numbers or cute sayings that highlight all the subtle ways children are conditioned from birth — to be sports fans, little ladies, whatever.

A third gallery presents a kind of reprise: a third Semmel painting of a woman bathing a young boy (possibly the issue of the sex act implied by her paintings in the first gallery), a beautiful little study for the Albers textile and a final photograph of a child's garment by Ms. Shaver.

This assembly of objects is, to say the least, ripe with Goberesque resonances and opposites: life versus death, art versus craft, freedom versus punishment, family versus the individual, parent versus child. It provides a narrative, a progression of meanings. But even more interesting are the visual interactions, which amplify the works formally as well as symbolically.

I doubt if Ms. Semmel's images of dramatically foreshortened bodies (always depicted from the viewpoint of their owners) have ever looked more powerful or primal than in this spacious setting. Their forms almost seem to project out into the room, while the delicacy of their colors is heightened by the muted tones of the surrounding works.

In this context, the Albers textile, already full of affinities to the work of Paul Klee, becomes completely unabstract; it suggests a baby blanket, not to mention "women's work." Its contrasting blocks of gray, some of them embroidered with plus signs, begin to read as the windows of a house or a cemetery full of crosses. This suggestion, in turn, makes Ms.

Noland's sculpture, which is a bit grim to begin with, read as a tombstone.

Mr. Gober's goal seems to be to open the viewer's mind to new thoughts, interpretations and cross-references. He is so successful that Mr. Beck's video almost begins to read as an unusually literal metaphor for that very process. This possibility is only briefly cheering, but that doesn't prevent Mr. Gober's latest curatorial effort from being one of the best group shows of the season.

ROBERTA SMITH