

ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES: Jim Isermann

By Bruce Hainley | Summer 1999

SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

Why is it that so much of the critical discourse around Jim Isermann's work is so drearily conservative? Loopy, Op-ish arrangements of pattern on pattern; brightly hued colored shapes recalling cartoons, cotton candy, and pharmaceuticals; a zanily thorough investigation of fabrics and textures as well as the way putting a hole in something creates an instant frame; a canny renegotiation of the Minimalist object, modern architectural and interior craft—Isermann deftly and humorously plays with all these matters and materials. Yet except for Rhonda Lieberman, most writers have celebrated Isermann's project only to champion a visual (and generational) fatwa, favoring hard work and precision at the expense of a liberating visual delirium. Even David Pagel, curator of "Fifteen," the recent survey of Isermann's output of the past decade and a half, fesses up about Isermann's "meticulously crafted rugs, fabrics, stained-glass panels and furniture [which] don't really fit in with the dominant trend of fashionable avant-gardism. Instead they find their home among a loose constituency of aging optimism." Yikes.

Isermann's time-consuming, manually intensive methods of fabrication are no doubt important, but faced with the odd beauty of his *Untitled (rug) (0296)*, 1996, a hand-braided cotton twill rug whose two panels present inverted versions of each other's vivid Day-Glo pattern, causally referencing Frank Stella as much as Carl Andre, the viewer has a hard time privileging the handicraft at the expense of the art-historical critique, or vice-versa—meaning that, for all the weaving in this show, Isermann is unraveling hackneyed plotlines of art and design. He proposes that Minimalism's winnowings are also a kind of fanaticism, and his work achieves much of its gorgeousness because of how obsessional and crazed it is, not too many removes from therapy artwork or Sarah Winchester's Llanda Villa gone moderne.

Isermann brought these concerns into dazzling focus by covering the walls of the museum with his yellow, blue, and orange vinyl decals, which formed a complicated background for the work displayed. Unlike Warhol's cow wallpaper, Isermann's stickers had to be carefully arranged square by square, creating a dizzying interlocking pill pattern. The wall pokes through in places, just as orange decals remain visible through the hole at the center of the red, white, and blue *Untitled (hole painting) (2387)*, 1987.

Isermann's practice encourages the viewer to spend time figuring out his or her obsessions; to be the expert of one's own drives may be the only true path to happiness. So as much as Isermann's work relates to the high art and design precedences of Jean Arp, Alvar Aalto, and Bridget Riley, his wonderfully holistic project, blurring the categories of private and public, life and art, art and design, should be positioned near the more problem-

atic examples of Hasi Hester's pattern-on-pattern interior designs or Sister Parrish's use of staunch yet gaga florals—problematic because, despite recent mouthing about the critical and aesthetic importance of design, there's still something suspicious and, well, why not say it, faggy about it, when it is embraced with a passion and gusto like Isermann's.

Hung against the blue decals, *Untitled (Shag painting) (0819)*, 1989—its top half featuring radiating semicircles of turquoise and red enamel paint, its bottom half presenting the same semicircles but in orange and red shag—suggests record grooves or a hypnotic maze, something that could be the backdrop for a B-52's video as well as an acute comment on where painting might go to remain vital. The pure products of America go crazy. This show invites and compels anyone to go into that pure, strange mode, which is so wonderfully wrong—and so far from any definition of being right.