

HANDLED WITH CARE

By Rhonda Lieberman | June-August 1998

frieze

When I think about Jim Isermann's work, I am reminded of Tom Snyder, the late night talk show host of the 'simultini' (simultaneous broadcast on radio and TV) who babbles on and on like a big yenta. If an old woman cracked herself up about her personal affairs and 'mother Snyder' the way he does, she would surely be dismissed as a self-obsessed, irrelevant old biddie, but because Snyder [resents the image of the mature, helmet-headed figure, he somehow gets away with it. He does more to deconstruct the authority of the white male talking head than an army of p.c. alrighnicks.

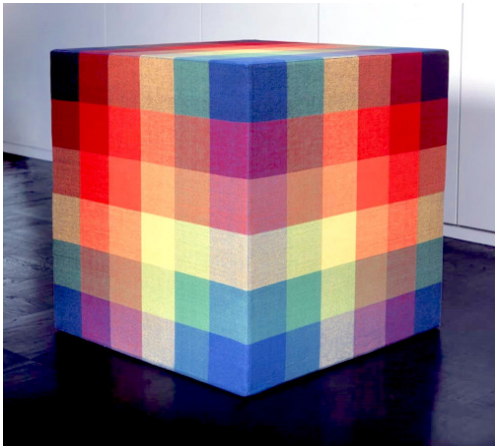
What Tom Snyder does for the talking head, Jim Isermann does for the formalist Modernist *objet*. Using the craft techniques of ladies' handiwork and the meditative processes of occupational therapy, he decorates the forms 'purified' by the ultra-macho modern masters with their famous mission to strip aesthetic form of all references to decorative tsatchkes. One recalls the cube-form of yesteryear as it was served up straight: the Robert Morris mirrored cube, the Tony Smith cube of solid, content-free presence; in Isermann's contemporary West Coast hands, these icons of 60s Minimalism get a provocative plaid makeover into something beautiful stuck between a formal thing and a decor thing.

It's as if the artist asked: 'How faggy could I make the Minimalist object?' Indeed, while Modernism eschewed the tsatchke reference, Isermann openly cultivates it. Even more than the minimalism-with-content that veered dangerously close to being the official art of the early 90s, Isermann's work most pointedly concerns itself with the foregrounding the vagaries of the trendy gaze. Fascinated with the 'supergraphics' of the 60s that 'anyone could understand,' Isermann set out to explore why the visual styles that are so entrancing one minute look dated the next. It is this ever-changing relationship to what our eye considers cool that Isermann references in his fine art productions.

In art historical terms, you could say that Isermann has been mining a fascination with the difference between retinal art – what we see – and out involuntary historicizing point of view, that is, our ability to look at the same exact thing one minute and see it as timeless and then as history the next minute. The gap opens up here is the soul and substance of fashion. In the deepest sense. Setting up a Moebius strip for the viewer, Isermann's work takes the viewer through a fashion catwalk of endlessly obsolescent taste; dwelling in this place as a phenomenon in itself, you find yourself on the plane of fine art.



Untitled, 1997
Hand-braided cotton
Courtesy: Feature, New York



Cubeweave, 1997
Hand-loomed cotton
Courtesy: Feature, New York

One could say that Isermann's work is asking: if the pure form of Modernism was supposed to transcend fashion, why has it failed in this mission? Why does our point of view fail to cooperate with the modern goal of timelessness? Why are our eyes such stubborn historicists? Why does a Donald Judd sculpture look so late 60s? And stained glass so hippie-ish? These two forms were once at opposite ends of the taste spectrum. Now 'low' and 'high' have melded together in our 90s eyes as both hopelessly coded references to the same period: the difference between pop and fine art has been dissolved by the apparently stronger visual solution of time.

For example, *Flowers*, a 1986 installation, featured furniture – a symmetrical blossom of seat petals with overgrown petal armrest – co-ordinated to complement flower paintings that bloomed with hard-edged flora. The effect of the series was halfway between pop-nature and op art, like the offspring of Kenneth Noland target paintings mated with Andy Warhol flowers as interpreted by Vasarely. Later hybrid works were made of half-fine art, half craft materials, such as enamel painting and acrylic rug, united by ingenious and mesmeric patterns.

Isermann's recent hand woven rugs, wall-hangings and objects each establish their own integrity by generating the pattern completely within the constraints of the material to achieve a form that is determined by it. Here you could say that organic unity, or 'pure form' reerupts in an uncanny return of the Modernist mission that Isermann had rejected (or repressed). The 1997 hand-braided, cotton woven doughnut sculpture shape was a solution to the weave. The capsule-like pill shaped sculpture of the same year is partly a formal solution to a material problem: making one weave into a form.

While the plaid cubes and groovy op art patterned stained glass tableaux present craft versions of 'high art,' they are not mere art-historical sendups. Yet to an art-jaded eye, Isermann's woven double square rug lying on the floor is impossible to see without thinking of Stella's solemn black square canvases of the 60s – ultra-serious Old Boy Painting making the same square within a pattern, with the thin white lines echoing the shape of the frame and articulating the pictorial space on the picture plane. Isermann's hand-braided cotton twill *Rug* (1996) seems a homey, colourful version of that blue-chip high-Modernist icon; it inspired this viewer to envisage a much-needed product for museum gift shops – the Frank Stella craft kit for the tasteful hobbyist. While Isermann's work has a somewhat ironic edge because it mixes the vocabulary of fine art purity with references to low art design, it cannot be reduced to camp or kitsch. There is a sense of humour: I can easily see Isermann's natty plaid *Cubeweave* (1996) hanging out near the ascetic boxes of Donald Judd, giving them a jaunty, perhaps not unwelcome, wink.