

Art in America

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Al Hansen at Gracie Mansion

The peripatetic Al Hansen, who died last June, was peripherally involved with most of the important movements of '60s art. Without ever settling down, he flirted with Pop, Happenings, Fluxus and performance. His best-known works remain his collages inspired by the stylized figure of the Venus of Willendorf. This exhibition surveyed three decades of these collages, along with a few choice examples of other work.

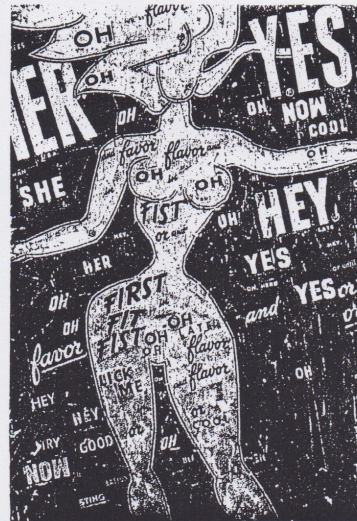
With a comic insouciance, Hansen chose as his signature medium the Hershey Bar chocolate wrapper. In his collages, Venus figures are patched together using either the inner, silver-foil liner or the outer, dark brown papers. Scattered across the figures as well as the backgrounds are words pieced together from the wrappers' logos and promotional copy. Hansen concocted from those letters a surprisingly wide range of anagrams, which he arranged within the collages' central images. He called these fields "word operas," and they function to poetically establish the mood of individual pieces.

One of the earliest collages,

Then the Men in Tuxedos Ordered Her To Strip (1965), depicts a buxom nude dancing, egged on by an aggressive crowd. Exhortations float around ("Hey," "Now," "Oh"), while words and letters on her body register her violent resentment ("RRRRRR," "FIST"). Other collages employ warring fields of words like HE, SHE, HER, ERR and YES. A range of different kinds of sexual tension is evoked in the works, from gentle eroticism to violation. One of the few non-Venus images, *Chicago Gat* (1966), suggests a downbeat film noir with a chorus of words spelled out within the form of a revolver. (Appropriately, this piece is owned by Mr. Ray Gun himself, Claes Oldenburg.) The style of the collages generally moves from Pop to more painterly compositions, and the initial athletic and floozy Venuses give way to more massive and mythically loaded presences.

This packed exhibition also included a surprising example of an early Hansen Pop painting—a penciled portrait of Jane Holzer—and a group of Venus collages made from cigarette butts, a nasty medium whose traces of saliva, lipstick and ash provide a jaded yet visceral punch. A complete Hansen retrospective is planned later this year at the Cologne Stadtmuseum.

—Michael Duncan



Al Hansen: *I Haven't Forgotten*, 1967, mixed mediums on wood, 8 1/2 by 6 1/2 inches; at Gracie Mansion.