

# Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

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## SANTA MONICA

### Larry Mantello at Food House

Just as '70s Pattern and Decoration work found inspiration in the exotic and intricate decorative arts of the Near East, Larry Mantello's over-the-top sculptures and clusters of plastic gewgaws look to a heretofore neglected genre of Asian artifact: gift store junk manufactured in the sweatshops of Hong Kong and Taiwan. In his first solo show, Mantello brings us works made of pink, lime-green, yellow and red balloons, dog toys, beach balls, novelty condoms, plastic chains, car deodorizers and inflatable hearts. Titled "Pleasure Treasure," the exhibition is a celebration of brand-new things that no one needs, in quantities no one could consume. And-what a relief-the work is devoid of heavy-handed social comment about the excesses of "commodity culture."

Mantello employs as formal elements the "look-at-me" palette and "touch-me" textures of this brightly colored junk designed to appeal to the impulse shopper. The work is temptingly oral: its candy-hued plastic calls out to be grabbed and chewed by babies of all ages. As in the work of Jessica Stockholder, the odd juxtapositions of texture and color in Mantello's assemblages yield abstract sculptural and painterly effects. The Mobile *Early Bird*, a typical study of clustered materials, is made of a huge rawhide dog bone suspended from the ceiling, from which dangle feathers, ropes, chains, plastic fruit and assorted doodads.

Mantello invigorates modernist formal ideas by using materials from the lowest reaches of "low" culture. Taking cutout images and text from tacky greeting cards, he assembles small oblong cubist constructions that are held together with metal clips. He then applies dense layers of ink tattoos to make patterned collages that look like abstract paintings. *Pleasure Chess*, the principal installation in the show, was a big sand-pile island with a plaster Greek column pedestal and dividing screens made from slat blinds. Streams of small plastic items, bunched on chains strung from the gallery ceiling, seemed to rain onto the island from the sky.



Larry Mantello: *Pleasure Chess*, 1993, mixed mediums; at Food House.

Mantello set the hedonistic mood of the show with a rotating mirror-ball and a disco tape blaring '70s classics like "Disco Inferno and "Fly Robin Fly." Just as Pattern and Decoration seemed born in reaction to the dry control of Minimalism and Conceptual art, a slew of younger artists like Mantello seem to be reacting against the austere neo-conceptualism and political art of the late '80s. His Pop mindset transforms these ridiculous objects with an Oldenburg-like desire to celebrate the beauty of the ordinary. Without condescension, Mantello is able to embrace the oddball forms and colors of this useless excess. Unlike, say, Jeff Koons's sarcastic ceramic appropriations, Mantello's gift-shop trash presents us with a forgotten and neglected experience: unqualified pleasure.

-Michael Duncan