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Art in Review

Just Kick It Till It Breaks

The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street, Chelsea
Through April 28

This group show, organized by Debra Slinger and Matthew Lyons of the Kitchen, is a textbook example of how political content operates in new art: in a slanting, unmonumental, coding-within-coding way that dodges ideology and trades earnestness for agile, deadpan wit.

References to past alternative cultures are frequent, but rarely nostalgic. Josephine Meckseper's video "Rest in Peace" intercuts images of recent antiwar protests with an orgy scene from a 1960s hippie-lifestyle film, with shots of what appears to be a college discussion group attended by bored and fidgety students.

Everything feels retro. Heroism is over.

So is the vision thing. Corey McCorkle spreads 19th-century broadsides, produced by the utopian Oneida Colony, on the gallery floor. They look as if they should go under a kitty litter box. Meredith Sparks cut-and-pastes pictures of the Bader-Meinhof gang. Carol Bove revisits a druggy moment when Beat and Hippie merged. From Scott Hug we get Warholian mug shots of low-grade celebrities (Paris Hilton, Mike Tyson), from Bozidar Brazda a souvenir of "The Unknown Ones," a punchy East German punk band that will probably stay unknown.

A tie-dye sunburst mandala by Michael Phelan is also a Color Field painting, a target and an American flag. Two neat but busy installations by Fia Backstrom are like consumerist processors, shmushing together corporate logos, out-of-date manifestos, designer tableware, art by other artists — namely Roe Ehrbridge and Kelley Walker — and Play-Doh imitations of their art.

In this context of scrambled values Adam Helms's drawings of heads in black ski masks are mere terrorist chic, Gardar Eide Einarsson's "Liberty or Death" flag a snazzy bath towel. High up in a corner hangs a text piece by Dave McKenzie: "Tomorrow Will Be Better." If artists can just keep savaging history, kicking forms and fracturing received ideas, it might least might not be worse.

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