



Fang Lijun: *1999.2.1*, 1999, woodcut on rice paper mounted on six paper scrolls, 16 by 24 feet; at Thomas Erben.

Fang Lijun at Thomas Erben

Now in his early 40s, the Beijing-based painter and printmaker Fang Lijun was still a student in the print department at the Central Academy of Fine Art when he participated in the landmark exhibition "China Avant-Garde" (1989) at the China Art Gallery in Beijing. The show also included such artists as Wang Youshen, Geng Jianyi and Xu Bing, among the most interesting in China. Fang went on to make a name for himself with his images of bald-headed thugs whose nihilist aspect might be read as a statement of pessimism, if not despair, about the state of contemporary Chinese society. Fang's bad boys are Chinese, of course, but their implications are universal; classic emblems of rebellion verging on caricature, they seem intent on breaking through the mores of polite society. Fang became internationally known, showing at the Venice Biennale in 1993 and 1999, as well as in the large exhibition "Inside Out," curated by Gao Minglu, which was held jointly in New York at the Asia Society and P.S. 1 in 1998-99.

At Thomas Erben, Fang showed large woodcuts that range in size from 48 by 32 inches to a monumental 13 by 28 feet; printed on rice paper, they were mounted (some in many parts) and displayed on scrolls. The work shows that Fang's hard edge has softened just a bit. His still-bald figures, exaggerated in their yearning poses, suggest more existential dimensions. In the 13-by-28-foot woodcut from 2002-03, Fang fills the expanse with the heads of open-mouthed figures,

printed in a garish yellow with orange highlights; in this, the sole color print in the exhibition, they form a seething crush of humanity. In another huge work (16 by 24 feet), like the rest printed in a more subdued black, white and gray, Fang depicts a solitary swimmer, his mouth open and his clean-shaven head held just above water. His expression is one of intense effort, just short of agony; he could stand for the Everyman as well as for those suffering the hardships of contemporary life in China.

Fang also included a series of vertical 8-by-4-foot woodcuts. All of them were printed in 2001, with three presenting the grimacing bald men. The fourth shows two hands stretching up out of a body of water and reaching toward some flowers. An artist of ardor and despair who refuses to succumb to wishful thinking, Fang seems nonetheless to want to keep alive small avenues of hope.

—Jonathan Goodman

Jane Benson at Satellite

Hundreds of feet of painted foil garlands provided Jane Benson with the ammo for *Underbush* (2004), a full-scale operation that transformed the gallery. In a dense, dramatic, swagged fashion, this intricate web of holiday readymades encompassed the entire ceiling. Radiating from the middle, the thick, undulating strands formed a chandelierlike canopy with some random tendrils dangling like stalactites. Benson meticulously spray-painted each section of foliage with a different camouflage color: tan, brown or olive green. Even the

faux pine branches at the center were "dyed to match" and sprinkled with painted stars. The elaborate piece was eight months in the making.

Normally used to mark celebratory moments, these luxurious streamers were manipulated to convey something different, darker. With this heavy presence hanging overhead, the title "Underbush" took on an explicit military meaning, with more of a nod to our president than to plant life. The camo-palette allowed the political overtones to prevail.

The ultimate pendant piece hung on the wall: a camouflage jumpsuit (2004) that had been carefully cut to bits. Benson demonstrated her scissor skills as she effectively dismantled the garment into a recognizable, however tattered, shell of itself. This "war-torn" suit, just barely kept together by a thread, seems

Center (in 2002), "Underbush" proves that Benson again rethinks the meaning and use of familiar objects and materials while making a pointed statement.

—Tracey Hummer

Barbara Kruger at Mary Boone

For some observers of the social landscape, the depth of an analysis is best measured by the acid content of its findings: if you know the worst about someone or something, you know the essential truth. Barbara Kruger is of that disposition, and her observations have never been more corrosive. Nor have they ever been presented in more compelling form. *Twelve*, her new four-channel, 12-minute video projection, filled the gallery's big main room with a dozen professionally acted, talking-head vignettes that



Jane Benson: *Underbush*, 2004, foil garlands and spray paint, dimensions variable; at Satellite.

symbolic of our president's claims of keeping the country unified amid conflict.

British-born Benson lives and works in New York. She created a companion set of watercolors (not on display) that reference her roots. Here, she depicts modified versions of the massive camo-garland in different rooms at 10 Downing Street (the location is identified on the pages). This compositional twist ties the title in with a commentary on the position in which Prime Minister Tony Blair finds himself. As a politically charged chaser to her manipulated artificial flora and fauna at the World Financial

together make up a kind of cross-cultural American sampler. The demographic is a little compressed in terms of age and socioeconomics, with youth and material comfort predominating. But within that band of the spectrum, Kruger achieves a fair amount of diversity.

There are two dysfunctional families, one white and one black, two groups of art students and several sets of friends. The dialogues, which last from seconds to a couple of minutes, are tightly written, with perfect pitch for a variety of vernaculars, and the performances are, by and large, competent and believable.