

## Loaded Magazines



Dean Kessman, a tall, thin, balding man with big sideburns and hipster glasses, loves to use the word “subtle” to describe his recent pieces. Many of his efforts have been anything

but: He excavated his Midwestern Catholic-boy background by smearing ink blots between biblical pages in *Rorschach Bible* (1996) and by photographing a series of front-yard shrines to the Madonna in *Our Lady of* (1994-1995). But lately, the Capitol Hill resident, 39, has taken a turn toward the unassuming.

For his 2002 show “Plant Detritus,” the coordinator of the photography program at George Washington University would walk around his neighborhood, looking for just the right pile of twigs, branches, or bird-nest remnants. Then he’d snap a Polaroid of the pile before scooping the stuff up and removing it to his studio—where he’d painstakingly reunite each sundered twig with its fellows, regroup each withered branch into its original formation, remind each dead-grass strand of its proper place. Finally, he’d rephotograph the resulting pile with a large-format camera for display alongside the pile itself and his near-identical original shot.

“Cover to Cover,” Kessman’s new show at Conner Contemporary Art, is just as preoccupied with the little-noticed—but this time, the original sources are self-consciously arty themselves. Last December, Kessman went on an art-magazine-buying spree that included stalwarts such as *Artforum* and *Art in America* along with such niche pubs as *Eastern Art Report*, *Nka*, and *Frieze*. He then rolled each one of his purchases into a cylinder, clamped it tightly, and scanned the edges of its slightly overlapping pages into his computer; then he rerolled the mag the other way from the same end and repeated the

process. After some minor color correction, he blew the images up—sometimes to 30 times their original size—and digitally printed them out.

The results—30 works that range from 2 to 6 feet long and are between 2 and 6 feet tall—look like the marriage between a Washington Color School canvas and a bar code, slivers of ads, criticism, and reproductions of other people’s art asserting themselves. Jeffrey Anderson, chair of George Washington’s Fine Arts and Art History Department, says he likes Kessman’s play in “Cover to Cover” between reality and abstraction. “I didn’t know what it was at first...but they’re really striking,” says Anderson. “I’ve bought three for my house.”

“It’s fragmented information, moving in a stream,” Kessman says, fiddling on his G4 Powerbook. “I’m interested in having them read as one piece—but also as individual pieces...information moving, changing, growing, shrinking.”

Kessman traces the appropriationist underpinnings of his new work to such ’80s artists as Sherry Levine and Richard Prince, but describes his project differently. “[Their work] was about questioning originality, whereas what I’m doing is questioning photography in general,” says Kessman. “It’s not as politically charged.”

Kessman’s pieces, with their implied commentary on their source material, seem potentially controversial, but Leigh Conner, owner of Conner Contemporary Art, notes that associates at magazines such as *ArtForum* and *Sculpture* have sent her favorable responses. And Kessman says “Cover to Cover” isn’t the revenge of a disgruntled artist on his critics.

“I love them,” he says of the magazines he uses. “I value [the criticism]...I spend a lot of time reading these magazines and enjoying them. I think a majority of what’s written [in them] is fairly positive. You want a positive review, I guess.”

—Bidisha Banerjee

“Cover to Cover” is on display to Saturday, March 27, at Conner Contemporary Art, 1730 Connecticut Ave. NW. For more information, call (202) 588-8750.