

ART IN REVIEW

'Bathroom'

Thomas Healy Gallery
530 West 22d Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 7

Much of the high-profile art of the 1990's has been about the body and its once-unmentionable intimate functions. So the thematic focus of this sharp and entertaining group show, organized by the critic and poet Wayne Koestenbaum, makes timely sense.

Nearly 130 works have been installed against soft pink and aqua walls, and references to bathing and bathtubs abound. The show opens, for example, with Silvia Gruner's rose-colored bars of soap in the shape of mother goddesses. They are followed by Nan Goldin's photographs of friends taking a comfy soak, Fernanda Brunet's tondo painting of a woman submerged in water, and Maria Haas's sudsy blond-bombshell self-portrait.

Most of the male imagery is homoerotic, from a 1953 Paul Cadmus etching of two men sponging down, to a bunch of good-natured cheesecake shower scenes shot by Bruce Bellas (a.k.a. Bruce of L.A.) and Bob Mizer (a.k.a. Athletic Model Guild). These pictures are supplemented by the sexually more explicit work of young artists like Mark Beard, Bill Costa and Matthias Herrmann.

Every now and then, as in a 1935 watercolor by Alice Neel recording the post-coital ablutions of the artist and a male lover, the lavatory is unisex. And all sorts of identities converge in photos by the redoubtable Paul McCarthy, in which he sits in the tub wearing a platinum bouffant wig while smearing himself with ketchup and cold cream.

More conventional bathroom products appear in Neil Winokur's photographic still life of toiletries, and in Jeff Burton's casual, moody array of Aqua Net cans on a shelf. Joe Brainard's oil-on-canvas tableau of toothbrushes is complemented by two all-white paintings by John Perreault executed in toothpaste. And toilet paper is ubiquitous. Gerhard Richter paints pictures of it; George Stoll replicates rolls of it in sculptures; Kako Ueda folds it into neckties, and Carolee Schneemann, in a landmark feminist work from 1972, soaks it with her blood.

The presence of body fluids in Ms. Schneemann's work points to the fundamentals of bathroom hardware that dominate the show. The urinal, that venerable Duchampian icon, plays an inventive role in pieces by Tom Sachs, Andy Warhol, Sarah Lucas and Steven Pippin. Yolande Daniels and Beth Katleman offer homages to the bidet. A range of artists — Jonathan Weinberg, Joep van Lieshout, Sam Messer, Margaret Morgan, Gavin Turk and Iké Udé among them — lend the prosaic toilet bowl an interesting high-low mystique.

The idea of the loo as a trysting place, fraught with risks and voyeuristic potential, is addressed in an amusing video by Chivas Clem and Claude Wampler and in photos by Bradley Braverman and Glenn Ligon. And other works touch on the peculiar self-absorption that the bathroom's privacy encourages. Such is the case in Marilyn Minter's photo of her mother scrutinizing herself in a mirror while applying makeup, and in a painting by Hugh Steers of a nude man in high heels balancing like a dancer on a toilet bowl rim.

Steers, who died in 1995, once spoke of the recurrent images of bathrooms in his paintings as symbols of culture and instinct in collision, a place where people get naked and get dressed, get sick and get washed up, where a society obsessed with cleanliness and horrified by mortality creates, as he said, sculpture for depositing waste. Mr. Koestenbaum clearly knows his way around this conceptual terrain and takes the very 90's notion of abjection as an existential condition seriously. But he also comes through with a show of genuine offbeat charm, and one that offers an answer to the New Yorker's classic, even mythic search for a clean and attractive public restroom. It's here.

HOLLAND COTTER