

METRO PICTURES

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Gretchen Bender: *People in Pain*, 1988, silkscreen and paint on heat-set vinyl, neon, 84 by 90 by 11 inches; at Metro Pictures.

Gretchen Bender at Metro Pictures

Gretchen Bender's assemblages—incorporating television sets, movie titles and photojournalistic and computer-generated images—record a culture in the process of writing its own obituary. Television and film, mediums which seem to afford their subjects instant immortality are represented by Bender instead as purveyors of death.

The wall piece *Creatures* is from an edition of ten dated 1985-88, previously shown in part at Nature Morte. A heavy sheet of brushed steel stands apart from the wall, as frontal and flat as a movie screen. Into this, a narrow slot has been cut at eye level, which contains a piece of dark film with tiny illuminated lettering reading "CREATURES." The metal face has all the monu-

mentality and permanence of a Richard Serra or David Smith sculpture, while the film it holds is transient, almost immaterial. To read the lettering, which is possible only from an extremely close vantage point, the viewer is forced to interact with the work on unnaturally intimate terms. The title, intentionally displaced from its B-movie, science-fiction origins, serves notice that viewers are only creatures—vulnerable, animal alive for a passing moment of mortality.

In *I'm Going to Die*, a small, new color TV tuned into regular programming sits on a cantilevered black metal shelf. Over the screen, a centered message in black block letters silkscreened on a piece of acetate reads, "I'M GOING TO DIE." As a ready-made, the work possesses the rarefied commodity status of a Haim Steinbach or Jeff Koons

piece, but the of-the-moment programming returns the object to the realm of shared experience. The phrase "I'M GOING TO DIE" transforms the way the person on screen is perceived, whether it's Michael J. Fox or Jesse Jackson. The effect is all the more eerie in an age when the HIV virus lurks invisible in the general population.

More complex is the assemblage *Untitled (Relax)*, in which the single word "RELAX" is likewise inscribed on a television screen flanked top and bottom by two large-scale dry-mounted C prints. Both images are "borrowed" yet appropriation is less an issue than are context and metaphoric juxtaposition. On top is a 1981 war image by photojournalist Susan Meiselas (for which rights for a three-week show period were obtained through Magnum Photos). A pile of bloodied

corpses, limbs splayed and torsos swollen by the Central American sun, appears strangely inhuman. The location and perpetrator are unidentified: the scene is one of generic atrocity. Presented large, and in a gallery the image has an immediacy it might lack in a newspaper or magazine. The bottom photo shows a computer-generated three-dimensional imaging of a theoretical four-dimensional form. The topological mapping was conceived and executed by IBM researcher Alan Norton. Esthetically elegant, yet powered by Fortune 500 dollars, this computer image represents a realm of visual experience that we could not otherwise perceive; as abstract as pure math it's completely removed from human suffering. The television, sandwiched between the two, acts as a mediator inviting the viewer to "RELAX," to find solace in media-produced leisure activity.

People in Pain, the show's bombastic centerpiece, is a departure in scale and materials from Bender's established vocabulary. Six large units are joined to form a single wall-sized composite of some 90 individual black vinyl sheets. With blue-white neon backlighting, they make an ominous, brooding color field. Each sheet of vinyl has the name of a recent movie, spelled out in translucent letters, through which light shines—"LIFE AFTER LIFE," "CASUAL SEX," "THE DECEIVERS," etc. Bender then employs a heat gun to crinkle and crumple each title sheet so they come to resemble discarded newspapers. Grouped together the names become iconic, yet their configuration is chaotic, self-mocking. Electrical cords run to the floor exposing the piece's sinister machinelike nature.

Here, as throughout the show

Bender successfully groups stylistically disparate elements to form a highly cohesive conceptual program.

—John Zinsser