

# Art in America

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## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### NEW YORK

#### Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz at OK Harris

The mordant quality of Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz's recent trompe l'oeil paintings derives from the desolate nature of the images she chooses and her literal use of the gritty material she represents. Constructed on the border between two and three dimensions, the works take as their principal visual metaphor a battered, scarred and sometimes breached wall, with emblems of privilege visible on the far side.

In pursuit of veracity, the artist, who teaches at Wellesley, pores over an archive of photos including many she has taken herself over the years. She casts Hydrocal and paints it, scorches it, gouges it and laces it with graffiti. She adds found objects and, using oils, renders palm trees and a glimpse of tile-roofed villas beyond. The works vary greatly in size: several are not much larger than a postcard while one creates a tableau that comes close to human scale. Sometimes details of arranged detritus recall the vanitas tradition.

The four smallest paintings (2006) rehearse Spatz-Rabinowitz's dark motif of barrier and villa. Each is mounted on the face of a Judd-like welded steel box 8 inches deep, which thrusts into the viewer's space, but is visually distanced by a thick, clear glaze on the surface. *Palm Beach Real Estate* sports a battered

palm tree and the merest peek at a stucco-and-barrel-tiled villa beyond. Floating on the surface of the glaze is a written inventory of each room on offer, a flat statement of plenty. A misspelled "no loitering" sign rides on the glaze of the edgy *Encino, Gimme Shelter* rather than on the depicted wall; an array of graffiti laid down on the glaze of *Palm Beach Stormy* seems so vivid that it appears to cast a shadow below the glaze. At the opposite extreme, the 7-foot-high *Gates of Paradise* includes incised graffiti, bits of wire and nail heads in a program of ruined plaster that crumbles away to expose a grid of large-gauge angle iron and, beyond, palmettos, vines and the overhanging soffits of an otherwise unseen villa.

Resembling an open book, almost a diptych, the scabrous 20-by-39-inch *Division* (2004) reveals only a glimpse of a tiled roof through a rent in the nastiest of walls. Spatz-Rabinowitz's rendering draws attention to its complex surface of scarred stucco and patina of soot and acid rain. Next to a scrawled Mercedes star substituted for a peace symbol in this grim review of haves and have-nots is a misspelled warning in the form of the familiar parable of the rich man, the gates of heaven, the camel and the needle. In this accounting, the wall, however battered, stands.

—Edward Leffingwell

Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz: *Blight*, 2004, oil on pigmented, plasticized Hydrocal, steel mesh, 13 1/2 by 18 1/2 inches; at OK Harris.

