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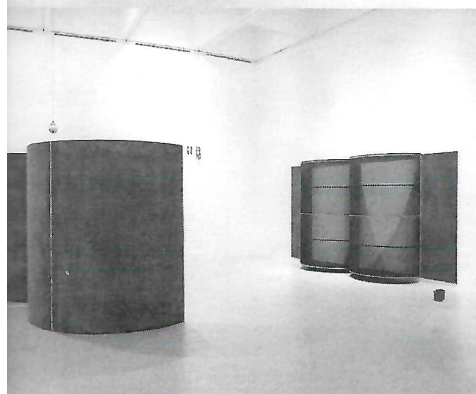
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Cover illustration: Max Dean, *As Yet Untitled* (1993–95), view of installation at Art  
Gallery of Ontario, photo by Isaac Applebaum

Contents illustration: Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Yellow Bed, Two Parts)*  
(1991), dental plaster, 66.38 x 27.25 x 28 in, photo by Lee Stalworth, courtesy  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution

## Distemper: Dissonant Themes in the Art of the 1990s

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington



Counter-clockwise from top: Thomas Schütte, *No Respekt and Innocenti Foto* (1994), mixed media and 31 photographs, 35.13 x 19.5 x 19.5 in, photo courtesy Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes, Depot du FRAC Languedoc, Roussillon, France / Miroslaw Balka, *Zeitnot* (1996), steel, soap, electric cord, linoleum, felt, collection of the artist, courtesy of London Projects / Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Yellow Bed, Two Parts)* (1991), dental plaster, 66.38 x 27.25 x 28 in, photo by Lee Stalworth / Photos courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

The summer exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum presented the work of ten international artists under the title "Distemper: Dissonant Themes in the Art of the 1990s." Distemper, the title's key word, refers to disorders that affect the mind or body or that are political or civil in nature; and its meanings were effectively reflected through the range of work presented. The title's dischordant tone and the exhibition's content were rich in associations, but the show was not without humour.

Many of the works in the exhibition refer directly to the viewer either by making analogies to the human body or by requiring the viewer's presence for the work's completion. The elegant sculptures of Poland's Miroslaw Balka, America's Robert Gober and Britain's Rachel Whiteread made direct reference to the viewer's body in terms of scale, structure and feeling. The effect of Whiteread's *Slab (Plug)* (1994), in particular, was compelling. This slim, golden coloured rubber object, cast from the surface of a mortuary slab, lay upside down on the floor, its planar character disrupted only by a short vertical protusion at one end (in the shape of the drain). On one level the work is an actual rubber plug waiting to be put in place, in effect waiting to put an end to the flow from its surface. On another level, the work's scale and placement suggest a gravestone; the marks recorded in its surface are traces left from the examination of corpses – a poignant, wordless requiem to those that have passed on.

Other works dealt with states of anxiety. Argentina's Guillermo Kuitca makes paintings of genealogical charts and empty theatres, scenes that confer a sense of isolation. In contrast to Kuitca's contemplative settings, *Socle du Monde (Pedestal of the World)* (1992, refabricated 1996), by Britain's Mona Hatoum, might be described as tension materialized. This work, previously shown at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain, consists of a large cube, the entire surface of which is covered in a dense, dark pattern of entrails. Its surface, covered with iron filings held in place with magnets, appears matt and very heavy, with a spongy quality, as if more tension could be held in its thick coils. At the same time, the most fragile strands of filings could be seen in the transition area between coils, strands which suggested the fragility and vulnerability of not only this work, but of those who live under great pressure.

Finally, the work made by Germany's Thomas Schütte made reference to the failure of the Soviet state in a highly satirical and critical manner. Unlike the numerous Soviet monuments to patriotic workers striving for a higher cause, each of Schütte's sculptures depicts a trio of grotesque figures that are tied together and whose feet have been cemented into the base, yet struggle to be free. Schütte has underlined the inevitable disintegration of the State by using baking pans for bases – as if to suggest the cement inside them may be nothing more than cake.

John Gayer

