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Democracy Dies in Darkness

QUANDARY ON 7TH STREET

By **Jo Ann Lewis**

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Jackie Ferrara

MICHAEL KLEIN INC.

In her most recent exhibition, "Wall-works & Tableworks," Jackie Ferrara presented small-scale, rationalist wooden constructions. Built from layers of horizontal wooden slats, each of these seven works formed a pristine communal space that recalled traditional gathering places such as public baths and arenas.

Red Pool House 288, *Grey Pool House 292*, and *Yellow Pool House 289* (all 1993) each consist of a succession of rooms arranged laterally along a thin horizontal plane. While the actual function of each chamber is not clear, each space evokes the various elements of a public bath—pool, sauna, hot tub, etc. Other works, like *Linwood Balcony 281*, 1992, *Arena 284*, 1992, and *Red Sands 290*, 1993, are more akin to public follies, overconstructed to the point of dysfunctional paralysis. In *Linwood Balcony 281*, for example, a long, thin, and awkwardly proportioned balcony is elevated above

Jackie Ferrara has become one of the most admired of American sculptors, both here and abroad, since Max Protetch first introduced her in his Washington gallery in 1975. In her current show at B R Kornblatt Gallery -- a high point of the season -- seven important works attest not only to Ferrara's staying power, but also to her growing power to mesmerize.

Ferrara fashions her reductive, modular sculptures from squarish strips of pine, poplar or redwood (Lincoln-log construction, but without notches), creating architectural forms that conjure ancient civilizations, temples and altars, but are, in fact, pure invention. The commanding, seven-foot-tall "Semaphore," for example -- a stepped pyramid made of pine lightly stained gray-green -- is stacked so that small openings repeat, or increase and diminish in size, creating rhythmic beats, or patterns, on the surface that hint at underlying mathematical sequences. Decoding them -- or rather attempting to -- engages the mind, as the eye is seduced by the pure sensuousness of the surfaces and the beauty of the craftsmanship.

Some of Ferrara's drawings -- elevations, cross-sections and views from the top of these sculptures looking down -- give a sense of how these patternings were designed to interact in three dimensions, as inlaid forms on one side echo openings on another. They graphically illustrate how clearly the artist thinks in three dimensions, and -- to some extent -- why it is so rare that one feels "finished" looking at one of her better works. "Square X" is another fine and mysterious piece that, in its patternings, also incorporates a distinctively postmodern look.

Ferrara arrives at Kornblatt Gallery just in time to resonate with a new show of work by Joel Shapiro at the Hirshhorn. Shapiro, like Ferrara, derived his pared-down formal language from minimalism, but has also transformed it into something very personal. How nice it would be if Ferrara were invited to create a site-specific piece to soften the Hirshhorn plaza.

The Kornblatt show, which opens today, will continue through Jan 6. Hours are 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays.
