

MY CULTURE BLEEDS HISTORY: The Pincushion Suite by John Kissick at the Leo Kamen Gallery, 80 Spadina Ave., until Jan. 30

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND PAIN

Monday, January 25, 1993

KATE TAYLOR For his current show at the Leo Kamen Gallery, John Kissick has taken as his premise a thought once summarized by Virginia Woolf: "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver or the headache. The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and at once language runs dry."

Kissick's Pincushion Suite is a series of works assembled into an installation that ruminates on the way in which pain beggars language. It includes photographs of a real pincushion imposed over images of Rococo paintings, texts sewn on lavish pieces of floral embroidery, and two paintings that resemble circus tarpaulins. The lettering on these makes reference to The Human Pincushion, a circus freak who, because he had no feeling in his skin, could allow the audience to stick pins in him. Kissick unites all this with a series of pillows tossed around the room, on which are embroidered words to describe pain - Stabbing, Throbbing, Blind - from a Canadian medical study that set out to build a diagnostic vocabulary.

Kissick is a young Canadian art scholar who teaches at Pennsylvania State University and has a new art-history textbook to his name. While there are no end of intelligent observations about the gap between language and pain in this work, it does seem to reflect that academic background. Perhaps in part because of the wide variety of styles and media he uses, there is a lack of integration between the ideas and the art. Indeed, the installation seems to have been created as an exposition of pre-determined themes, rather than as a natural out-growth of an ongoing artistic practice. It is only occasionally - as the words "My Body Hurts" cry out from a small plaque mounted on a beautiful piece of antique needlework, for example - that these works have that transcendental power which is fuelled by a fusion of heart, mind and hand.

Kate Taylor Review of Leo Kamen Exhibition, *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, January 25, 1993.