

BILL GILBERT

LINEAGE

CONLON SIEGAL GALLERIES
702½ CANYON RD., SANTA FE

PLAN B EVOLVING ARTS
1050 OLD PECOS TRAIL, SANTA FE

Process Art is Minimal's evil twin. Viewers seeking entry to Bill Gilbert's recent work might try the winding path of this proposition. Both movements emerged in the '60s in the wake of Abstract Expressionism's stormy passage through the American art psyche during the previous decade. Proponents of what became known as Minimal Art replaced AE's painterly ego, emotive bombast, and rhetorical gesture with Conceptualist *id* and severe, diffident solids whose geometric regularity defied their classification as "sculpture." Process Art, at first sight, seems antithetical to the Euclidean aesthetic of Minimal's "specific objects"—its choice of raw matter from nature and the common perishable stuff of daily life lend itself to the artist's focus on art as organic process.

But Process and Minimal, if not as playfully irreverent as their cognate, Pop, were equally iconoclastic in their rejection of the art object: Pop ridiculed it, Minimal demystified it, and Process absorbed it. What they all shared was an impersonal, anonymous feeling rooted in a reaction to Expressionist ego. Process and Minimal Art especially were oriented toward a larger Conceptualist belief in the efficacy of matter and matter's inherent *Kunstwollen*, its own will to create art. Today the two "movements" have common progeny in the work of artists whose discreet approach to materials explores the formal, suggestive, and productive properties of matter. That's the road that Gilbert follows.

Work by this artist was featured concurrently at two Santa Fe venues this summer. During July, Conlon Siegal Galleries showed a series of his wall-mounted ceramic pieces, and Gilbert's installation, *Lineage*, ran from late July through August at Plan B. At Conlon Siegal, vertical slabs of reddish or coal-black clay resembling shield fragments registered Gilbert's regular or random imposition of pattern produced by repeated marking with thumb, fingers, arm, and heel. These kiln-fired reliefs/impressions, accompanied by multiple-word titles, embodied the artist's intention that "the forms, patterns, and patinas work together to create images that have multiple references, that can be understood in numerous ways simultaneously."

Viewers who took the time to follow Gilbert's eidetic thought and reconstruct the artist's actions—shaping, marking, and firing large clay shards—were able to share in the satisfaction that always attends genuine interaction between maker and material. The slabs and patterns did evoke manifold conceits—lunar landscapes, sacred scrolls, digital parchment, and epic breastplates. The artist's process of discovery and contemplation fell short when it failed to cross from didactic experiment to complexity and insight. That is the inherent risk of Process Art. At Plan B, this process is pushed further, and Gilbert's art moves from a tactile/cerebral appeal to the spare, compelling power of his personal narrative.

Lineage is an installation comprising several adobe brick and stucco tableaux laid out on the floor of Plan B's warehouse space, and forested with a magical swath of long slender cooling sticks suspended from the structure's ceiling. The



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Lineage is an installation comprising several adobe brick and stucco tableaux laid out on the floor of Plan B's warehouse space, and forested with a magical swath of long slender sapling sticks suspended from the structure's trusses. The mud daub monochrome of the tableaux's red-brown hues emerges from the overall sepia atmosphere of the space itself, with its large grid of oxblood-stained concrete-slab floor and walls of chalk-red brick that rise up to wooden joists cantilevered with elegant triangular spans of iron trusses. Each tableau is an excavated site unearthed by the archaeology of memory, a raised relief whose surfaces record a human life.

The video of the central tableau, *Lantern*, with its polymorphous images of pairs of lovers kissing, gently celebrates Eros as the spark of social intercourse. Miniature videos become the pubes of the male and female torsos in the *Corn* tableau: The phallic images of electronic ears of corn shift into different types of maize in an ongoing cycle of regeneration. Great ovals of adobe brick on each wall serve to mirror Gilbert's gaze into his own life and its seasons, "seeing the rates of change in the flow of relationships, geologic motion, white water, evolution of plants and cultures...." This personal odyssey ends at the *Well*, where a submerged video screen creates the effect of swirling waters. Beneath the eddying surface Gilbert's image gradually evolves out of that of his father, into that of his son.

Gilbert's installation merges parallel tracks of Process and Minimal Art. For all the texture and palpable quality of *Lineage*, it is fundamentally a video piece. For all their apparent plasticity, the mud-daub tableaux and floating woods are less physical props than intangible projections of the artist's imagination. The *mise-en-scène* of *Lineage* is his world of private myth. Its poetic force lies in the artist's command of universal metaphor. Bill Gilbert's tableaux transform Plan B into some ancient basilica of memory, housing the precious vestiges of a human history, ours as much as his.

RICHARD TOBIN



Bill Gilbert, *amocantollorosueno*, ceramic, 29 x 17", 1998
 Photograph by John R. Donalds



Bill Gilbert, installation view