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hirsch: critic in residence

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This exhibition takes place five years from the end of the millennium and is representative of the state of fin-de-siecle art. So far, the '90s have presented few, if any, clear trends, no "ism"s, no dominant schools. The decade opened with an art market collapse that took with it dozens of galleries across the nation, as well as art industry careers; artists, journalists, dealers, curators, museums—all have experienced real limitations on their activities and ambitions, requiring greater strategies for survival. As the decade begins to wind down, artists are threatened with additional exigencies as a result of federal cutbacks, a fact that will have perhaps more serious consequences for places like Baltimore and Washington than for New York and Los Angeles, where there still survives enough disposable income to stoke the embers.

If this sounds like a situation to dampen the spirits of any but the most intrepid—or well-established—artists, it has had somewhat the reverse effect. Everywhere, they are feeling a sense of liberation from the hyped-up expectations of the '80s, when the art world's trickled-down version of Reaganism promised to make a hero of anyone with the right career savvy (or connections). No one is looking to superstar careers as the paradigm, either materially or artistically. And the existence of no major trends encourages a state of experimentation, heterogeneity, and multiplicity heralded by the critics of postmodernism. Bemoaned as aimless relativism by some observers, longing for the old days, contemporary art now offers a wide berth of practitioners of all media, traditional or otherwise. No one knows what will work, so almost anything goes. This may make some feel jittery, but for others—those of us who have long observed the diversity of artistic practice from the "trenches," as it were—from alternative galleries and artists' studios—it comes as no surprise, and something of a relief. All kinds of things slip before our eyes that in more affluent times may have been overlooked.

Larry Mullins' paintings first appeared in public in the streets, as words materializing on urban boarded windows and blank advertising spaces. In his paintings, words are either painted on a plaque set into a field of colored patterns, emblemlike, or are distributed throughout that mosaiclike field. Like Wallace, Mullins makes the letters into formal elements as significant as line and color. But Mullins wants his words to be read; indeed, even when their meaning is mysterious, it seems they are key to the painting's content. The words form inscriptions, short poems: "The alabaster fist bone finger boys"; "Buck Downs/pilot poet pirate"; "Doper/laughing jumping wealthy from about 9:30 till...9:45/callouses." He makes the letters big and small, upper- and lower-case, he paints them in various colors and paints them in such a way that their reading order could be scrambled or reversed, with no loss of meaning. Very often, says Mullins, they are portraits of friends and loved ones ("Eddie Bisese," "Buck Downs"). He acknowledges the influence of graffiti art, especially the work of Keith Haring; the way his paintings are signs is reminiscent of Marsden Hartley. Another contemporary word artist, the British painter Matthew Abbott, uses phrase clues from the London Times crossword puzzle as the poems in his works—similarly mysterious and succinct. Artists like Mullins and Abbott create texts for emotional resonance, rather than to instruct or edify. And both draw upon the visuals of op and psychedelica to give life to the poetry. In Mullins' work, words are flatter and more legible than in Abbott's; they glitter in their patterned fields like colored lights. An occasional backward letter "slows down the reading," says Mullins, makes the word more diabolical—perhaps promotes the artistic persona of a naive or outsider artist, for better or worse.