

Art in Review

Andrea Zittel
Michael Ashkin

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through June 18

These very different looking solo shows have two obvious links: utopian ideas and the desert. Andrea Zittel is known for interweaving art and design. She has devised, among other things, modular living units that riff on old-time Constructivist models, combining futuristic polish with a prosaic illusion of functionality.

A few years ago, Ms. Zittel moved to Joshua Tree, Calif., a desert area not far from Los Angeles, where she designed the Bauhaus-meets-Wild West items shown here. The objects — furniture carved from foam, baskets crocheted from yarn — are made from plain and inexpensive materials. Production is based on a mundane set of rules that almost anyone could master. Yet the results look intensely, eccentrically aestheticized: craft as art, and vice versa.

Any living space furnished with such designs is sure to send out stimulatingly mixed signals, to feel at once organic and idiosyncratic, purposeful and fanciful, like the environment generated by children's play. On Ms. Zittel's design frontier,

the desert is a kind of cultural tabula rasa, where conventions are scorched away. Here you can make a home and play "house" at the same time.

Michael Ashkin's show, titled "Adjnabistan," consists of a single piece. A kind of toylike architectural model set in the center of a big slab of white sheetrock, it represents an imaginary Middle Eastern town or village set in a vast desert landscape. The name he has give it, Adjnabistan, derives from the Arabic word for "stranger" or "foreigner." He invented it during a trip to the Middle East in the 1970's as a way to talk more freely with people he met during a politically dangerous time: one could allude to the "situation" in Adjnabistan when the real subject, Iran itself, was off-limits.

Recently Mr. Ashkin gave Adjnabistan physical form, and the town, as seen in the gallery, has fallen on hard times. Far from being a fertile oasis community, it sits apparently abandoned on bare sand. What Mr. Ashkin had initially envisioned as a

disembodied ideological free-zone has materialized as a refugee shelter or prison camp built from recycled packing containers, giant boxes of the kind used to ship machinery, weapons and military vehicles internationally.

In a news release, the artist says that he played with the model for a long time, adding to it, taking away from it, rearranging it — in the process imagining populations and historical cycles coming and going. Is the piece as we see it in the gallery a scene of desolation, or one in which a scrappy population survives and on which it will build? Where are we in the cycle?

All of this naturally has immediate application to Iraq, a country repeatedly hammered but resilient. Like most artists examining utopian concepts in an ideal-suspecting age, Mr. Ashkin offers no answers. But, like Ms. Zittel, he keeps the questions alive and burning, and that is crucial.

HOLLAND COTTER