

ART IN AMERICA 2003

Deborah Masters at Maurice Arlos and Smack Mellon

Deborah Masters, the Brooklyn-based artist whose monumental 28-panel installation "New York Streets" was commissioned for the new terminal at Kennedy Airport, recently had two simultaneous exhibitions, in Tribeca and Dumbo. The former, at the fledgling Maurice Arlos Gallery, was succinct and arresting. Five bulky, hieratic, larger-than-life figures made in Masters's signature cubistic style, like Old Kingdom pharaonic statues, sat cross-legged on what resembled wooden skids, their hands in their laps, deep in meditation. All faced forward except one, whose smooth, bald head brought to mind Donatello's *Lo Zuccone* (The Pumpkin Head). Made of cast nontoxic polyurethane, terracotta in color, these figures were stylized portraits of friends, their features simplified, expressions solemn. The gravitas with which they held themselves was both unnerving and soothing, their stubborn, timeless presence somewhat at odds with the sneakers, T-shirts, sweaters and dreadlocks they wore. Nonetheless, the effect was powerful. Compressed into the space of the gallery, they formed what seemed to be a cadre of Buddhists-in-training, images of thoughtful endurance.

In Smack Mellon's cavernous space, by contrast, Masters went wild. The main sculptures, situated around the gallery, were watched over by several enormous heads suspended from the 40-foot ceiling. Trailing white robe-like fabric,



Deborah Masters: View of *Lost and Found Souls*, 2002, papier mâché, fabric, memorabilia, mixed mediums, dimensions variable; at Smack Mellon.

they recalled the handiwork of Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theater. However, these were only part of Masters's overwhelming installation. (Sharing the space was a separate installation, equally shamanistic, by Karen Dolmanisth.) Consisting of 14 tables that Masters designated as altars, the work was essentially a hyper-dense accumulation of memorabilia—a kind of Ur-flea market, with photos of friends and family, other works by the artist, exhibition announcements, plus rosaries, images of Christ, madonnas and saints of every description, relics, dried flowers, small containers of salves, candles, letters and much, much more, including books made by Masters to explicate the theme of the table. Accompanying these altars, which functioned a bit like the

Stations of the Cross, were chandeliers, lamps, chairs and reproductions of works by artists important to Masters, such as Frida Kahlo, Giotto and Piero della Francesca. One altar was dedicated to Masters's childhood in Pennsylvania and Mexico; others to African rituals by way of the Caribbean, Mexico and the Southwest; another to the World Trade Center, with a book of images of the towers. Indeed, the entire ensemble was eschatological in import, a visual salute to the big themes of existence—life, death, memory and resurrection. This was horror vacui on a grand scale.

—Lilly Wei