

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

‘Night Scented Stock’

*Marianne Boesky Gallery
118 East 64th Street, Manhattan
Through Oct. 22*

Exhibitions juxtaposing art, artifacts, decorative objects and ephemera are in vogue, and more power to them. That the independent curator Todd Levin has contributed to their rise is confirmed by his latest effort, “Night Scented Stock,” a selective overview of 500 years of grotesque and phantasmagoric art, its discontents and occasional dissenters. Named for a sweet-smelling nocturnal flowering plant, it starts with prints by Hans Baldung Grien and Albrecht Dürer, includes the efforts of some 80 artists and has a perfect setting in the rather dainty 19th-century town house that is this Chelsea gallery’s uptown redoubt. It confirms once more that Surrealism, far from being a 20th-century phenomenon, has ever been with us.

Mr. Levin’s trove is rife with artworks and related objects you might not want to meet in a dark alley, many of which may never look better. He has installed his selections with flair and a fair amount of draped fabric; don’t miss the wonderful 1938 Magritte hanging on red brocade and visible in a mirror. There are photographs by Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), Matthew Barney and Joel-Peter Witkin, and a string of works by various actual and latter-day Surrealists, among them Leonora Carrington, Unica Zurn, Dorothea Tanning, Leonor Fini, Maya Deren, Colette (the artist), Michele Oka Doner and H. R. Giger. Joseph Cornell is represented by an ink-blot drawing that could be by Bruce Conner, Weegee by a distorted photograph of a nude that evokes Louise Bourgeois (who is also on hand). The painter Anj Smith seems to have something small and vividly weird for every occasion.

The show mutates from claustrophobic wunderkammer, or cabinet of curiosities, density on the first floor to near nothingness upstairs, where relatively cheerful, sometimes abstract works by Steve Wheeler, Jonathan Lasker and Louise Despont await. Mr. Levin may run slightly out of steam, but the breathing room is welcome.

By ROBERTA SMITH
Published: October 13, 2011