Artext
No. 69, May-July 2000
p. 50-55

Julian LaVerdiere: Art Direction
BY PAUL MYODA

Like a handful of artists negotiating the divide between gallery/museum and commercial work—i.e., fashion photography (Inez Van Lamsveerde), video (Doug Aitken), and prop fabrication (Keith Edmier)—Julian LaVerdiere is plotting the direction of art toward *art direction.* A consummate bricoleur, LaVerdiere imprints everything he touches with a distinct and immaculately detailed style. Style, in this arena, becomes substance, and meaning is preempted by visual experience. Slickness. freshness and branding, after all, bring top-of-mind awareness. The styles LaVerdiere uses depend on relative requirements. but conversant as he is with numerous genres, a unique amalgam is achieved; the particular method of incorporating styles itself becomes a style. Think of Stanley Kubrick: while *2001, Barry Lyndon* and *Dr Strangelove* diverge radically, what underpins them all is an idiosyncratic use of recognizable tropes. Manner is manifestation. And so with LaVerdiere: nineteenth-century mahogany and brass fittings perversely jibe with '70s sci-fi white; WWII-bunker architecture and Nazi rockets sit comfortably with double-zero smart materials and polymers. The overarching attitude is cool control, the ultimate end to be convincing, seamless, and nothing if not professional.

As the notion of selling out teeters on bankruptcy, a curious reversal has occurred: currency is now created when art projects have a double life in big culture. LaVerdiere knows both sides from an insider's perspective (Big Room is the art direction company co-founded by LaVerdiere with fellow artists Vincent Mazeau and Randall Peacock, among whose clients are Steven Klein and Calvin Klein, Ridley Scott Associates and Hewlett Packard, The Sci-Fi Channel and USA Network). And sometimes, LaVerdiere even creates work with a dual use in mind (a complex genealogical project for future cultural historians, should they be so inclined). For instance, the centerpiece of "Forbidden Aspirations For Ascendancy," his solo exhibition at Andrew Kreps in New York last year, was a nine-foot model of a wrecked nineteenth-century clipper ship, made according to his exacting specifications for a high-tech company's high-budget campaign. Housing it in an elaborate Plexiglas case suggestive of a time capsule or examination chamber. LaVerdiere retook what amounts to a floating signifier, and aims it toward different, but parallel destinations: art in the name of a brand, and art in the name of the artist.

A similar attitude prevails in LaVerdiere's forays into science, but with an element of quackery in tow, a charming charlatanism which colors his various inventions and experiments. Given the areas of investigation — time machines, cryogenic suspension units, death-deterring elixirs and electrotherapeutic treatments — this would seem to come with the territory, and these postures are integral to his projects' success. Without showmanship the show wouldn't go on. One thinks of the methodology of PT Barnum: Can't procure the fabled albino elephant? Paint Jumbo white. Jumbo dies in transit? Exhibit its skeleton. This is in no way meant to lift the curtain or expose the snake oil as placebo: the point is to appreciate LaVerdiere's projects from the perspective of theater. Like the best of science fiction. LaVerdiere provides us with various relics and memorials, furniture and devices which could be from another universe, a place where gravity and time, temperature and the elements are governed not physical laws, but by an edict of the imagination. Thanks to the obvious care and attention given to his displays, we give him the benefit of the doubt. A dream rather than a cure is the currency of the mountebank; on his platform, the unimaginable is made visible, the unreachable just around the bend. Indeed, the subject of dreams has played an important and consistent role in LaVerdiere's work, and the relationship between LaVerdiere's accomplishments as an art director and his extra-aesthetic investigations is most clearly defined in his designs and prototypes for beds. Rather than privileging the dreamwork of the Surrealists (a sign on André Breton's bedroom door read, "Do Not Disturb: At Work Dreaming"), LaVerdiere localizes elements which could manipulate experience on the other side of the sleep gate. It is the random quality that LaVerdiere wishes to control; the sticky tangle of the Surrealist's unconscious is something to be disciplined and made goal-oriented. Infamous for suggesting the possibility that waking life could be only an "unusual and persistent nightmare," Bertrand Russell did nonetheless admit that "certain uniformities are observed in waking life, while dreams seem quite erratic." LaVerdiere points to the possibility of making the erratic uniform.

In each of LaVerdiere's beds—sleep manipulation devices might be a mote accurate name—style reiterates projected use. For example, a nineteenth-century-style reclining model is meant to induce somnambulism and facilitate observation of the sleepwalker's motor functions. The wooden structure with leather straps brings to mind the image of J.M. Charcot coaxing his patients into hysterical fits. A more modern design is evident in a collapsing tub, designed with Bob Wysocki and Charles Platt according to strict patient stabilization protocols, which is currently in use to expediently move postmortem Alcor Life Extension Foundation clients into their suspended animation facilities, where they patiently await revival. Granted, all this implies a rather liberal definition of sleep, but it is precisely this type of speculative leap that LaVerdiere aspires to aid, instigate, and represent.

Consider a super-modern cot and “flight pillow” which have been threaded with electroluminescent cabling. Alluding to present research in the manipulation of circadian rhythms with artificial light, these beg the question of what they do. We aren’t necessarily let down when we learn they may do nothing but point to a place of undreamed-of possibilities, a yearning made manifest in the material world for visions of ascendancy. On the flip side is a floating Zeppelin-like bed that simulates a different gravity, its billowy form mirroring its intended function. Tethered to a gas tank marked, “DANGER: Hydrogen, Highly Combustible,” it conjures memories of the Hindenberg, looming in grainy, black-and-white focus, and speaks to LaVerdiere’s acknowledgement of the often catastrophic wake-up call rousing the dreamer’s sweet hubris. But ultimately, an unwavering optimism propels all of LaVerdiere’s work. To rephrase Kennedy’s famous line: Other men look at things as they are and say not. LaVerdiere looks at the way things could be and says, why not?

PAUL MYODA is an artist and writer based in New York.