

CREATIVE LOAFING

There's No Business

Contemporary exhibition examines the life of the company drone

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Is there a human being alive who can't relate to Michael Aurbach's sculpture "The Administrator," a room pimped out like a soulless, bureaucratic torture chamber? Like a set piece from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, Aurbach's full-metal installation is a vision of Work-as-Hell.

Every surface is covered in steel, from the boss/inquisitor's desk to the office walls that virtually scream "escape is futile!"

On the administrator's shelf is a box of "shoe lifts" to testify to a fragile ego in need of a boost. And instead of a desk ornamented with family photos, there are mirrors to reflect back the administrator's bottomless narcissism. The work's power is its universality: Worker bees from Wal-Mart to the Whitney have probably all played mouse to the executive cat depicted in Aurbach's set piece.

The immediate impression of the group show *What Business Are You In?* at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center is of artists wiping the sweat off their brows over their narrow escape from the stultifying death-house depicted in Aurbach's homage to the hierarchy and pretense of "real" jobs. This enormously clever and intensely fun show features 11 artists who see labor as both something to be avoided and as an inevitable feature of the artist's life.

While Aurbach tackles a universal notion of work, many of the *What Business Are You In?* artists give viewers a front-row seat on their own peculiar - often deeply psychological - workplace issues. Lucy Kimbell uses simple ink diagrams placed

directly on the gallery wall and her own singsong Julie Andrews voice heard on CD players hung nearby to express the various levels of insecurity, snobbery, doubt, fear, etc., involved in making art.

John Salvest is another artist who has a clean, sparse aesthetic packed to the gills with wonderfully layered insights. In "Stalactite," distracted, bored labor is expressed in a pyramidal formation of gum stuck to the bottom of a school kid's wooden desk. Salvest takes up the workaday grind again from a more grown-up perspective with "Paper Trail," in which the words "endless possibilities" are spelled out in ropes of shredded office paper. The piece expresses another kind of 9-to-5 ennui in which the promises and dreams of the corporate mantra take the form of mind-numbing busywork. The phrase "endless possibilities" begins to sound as sinister and disingenuous as the one above Auschwitz: "Work Will Set You Free."

Some of the best work in *What Business Are You In?* is concentrated in the Contemporary's main galleries, including the perversely slick sculptures by Jason Irwin, which parody the Vegas-style grandeur of corporate lobbies and offices as stage sets for some sublimated chest-beating. In Irwin's slick-but-hysterically cheapo combination of shiny acrylics, fake wood laminates and corporate logos sporting jungle cats, an idea is conveyed of proud, fierce Fortune 500 carnivores.

And the art world is hardly immune from such bluster or the commodification of people. In 2003, artist Andrea Fraser cut to the heart of the artist-customer transaction by agreeing to have videotaped sex with a collector in a performance/transaction valued at almost \$20,000. Two video works by Fraser in *What Business Are You in?* make the same point in less subversive ways.

The culture industry lampooned by Fraser in her videos can be as hierarchical and oppressive as any boardroom. And it can treat what artists do as just another marketable product. The scariest possibility artists such as Carey Young and Lucy Kimbell mull over in *What Business Are You In?* is not their escape from the workplace's clutches. It is an inability to see their labor in any terms but economic.

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