



**Lothar Hempel,
"America Disappears/
Only the Smile Remains"**
Anton Kern, through May 15
(see Soho).

What does one make of an artist whose work evokes the irresistible sweep of literary and cinematic narrative but doesn't tell any decipherable story? Such is the case with German artist Lothar Hempel. He toys with our curiosity (starting with this show's enigmatic title, "America Disappears/Only the Smile Remains"), only to frustrate it in the end.

Hempel's mixed-media constructions resemble flimsy stage flats for noir puppet shows, or maybe macabre window displays. As installed here, they flaunt their antiaesthetic appearance. But they're not really art objects; they're more like ciphers waiting to spar with the viewer.

In one piece, a cubic structure seems to crack open, revealing a freestanding cutout of a woman holding an ax—an image apparently snipped out of a magazine. Another piece, also a propped-up cutout, features an androgynous child atop a monstrous pony. A floodlight sunk in the middle shines right into the viewer's eyes, as if to blind us to any possible meaning for the work.



Lothar Hempel, *Leave All the Rest Behind*, detail, 1999.

Hempel hangs sheets of pink Plexiglas at eye level around the show, through which we can view the proceedings as if wearing the proverbial rose-colored glasses. Elliptical, moody texts are also pinned up here and there. They seem to caption whatever piece is nearest to them, but their casual placement deflects the usual authority of texts on a wall. They're more like title cards for what we're experiencing.

This show is actually the third of a trio of shows. The first was in Cologne, the second in London. Only a few people have seen all three, so most folks are limited to what's here to make sense of Hempel's overarching themes. The feeling that it would all fall into place if only you had a little more information is excruciating.

In film and literature, confounding an audience's expectations is a rich narrative tradition. That's less the case in art, perhaps, but Hempel plays it smart; he offers just enough tidbits to keep us coming back for more.—*Bill Arning*