

New York Times
By Holland Cotter
September 27, 2002

**‘Sacred Matter’
Karen Dolmanisth and Deborah Masters**

Smack Mellon Studios
56 Water Street, Brooklyn
Through Oct. 6

Installation art may have lost some of its cachet of late, but this uncompact medium is well suited to accumulative and performance-based modes of thinking and creating, as is evident in this joint exhibition of two artists at mid-career.

Deborah Masters is best known for her figurative sculpture, which includes wall reliefs installed at John F. Kennedy International Airport last year. A few examples are at Smack-Mellon, but only as components of an assemblage-style environment in which the artist does nothing less than tell the story of her life through thousands upon thousands of hoarded objects: photographs, drawings, religious statues, domestic items, newspaper clippings, bits of clothing, postcards and so on.

They are arranged in a series of altars touching on the artist’s Greek Orthodox upbringing, on childhood years spent in Mexico and Central America, on homes and adult relationships lost and found. Ultimately, the separate units seem to merge into a single altar, piled with offerings and overseen by huge suspended figures – they’re reminiscent of those produced by the Bread and Puppet Theater – that suggest a performance about the begin. (Recent sculptures by the artist are on view at Maurice Arlos Fine Art, 85 Franklin Street, Tri-BeCa, Through tomorrow.)

Karen Dolmanisth’s installation is even more stagelike. At its center is an enclosure of vertical branches, with circular patterns marked in powder on the floor inside. Significant-looking objects (ceramic dishes, test tubes) are arranged here and there; dresses and nightshirts hang from the ceiling like an airborne audience to a ritual in progress below.

The exact nature of that ritual remains uncertain as the artist continues to add to the piece week by week. This means the work has far less sense of visual resolution than Ms. Masters’s does; but then, art-making itself may be the ritual ingredient here. (The artist gives site-specific performances at the gallery on Saturdays; there will be one tomorrow from 3 to 5 p.m.) Whatever final shape Ms. Dolmanisth’s piece takes, in spirit it exemplifies the kind of incremental, open-ended, fundamentally theatrical exploration that installation, almost uniquely among material-intensive art forms, fosters.

ART IN REVIEW

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