

Art in America

June 1995



Christopher Tanner: *Cyndi*, 1995, mixed mediums on wood, 48 by 36 inches; at Bridgewater/Lustberg.

Christopher Tanner at Bridgewater/Lustberg

Stymied admirer: "I hate your new paintings. They look like some 13th Street Carmen Miranda drag queen."

Christopher Tanner: "Thank you for noticing."

It intrigues me that Christopher Tanner performs (in and out of drag, but always flirting with trashiness) as well as paints. Both his performances and his paintings embrace an acidic, self-conscious stylization, with results that are out-of-the-ordinary and bigger-than-life. Both endeavors exhibit an exuberant, brassy robustness, and speak an unapologetic gay patois.

The paintings in his recent exhibition are filled with broad whiplash strokes of acrylic paint, layered with subsequent Salome's veils of opalescent glitter. As if this isn't enough, Tanner attaches clots of brilliant paillettes that might be bunches of technicolor grapes or close-ups of nerve ganglia. Add trompe-l'oeil vines in acrylic—and more glitter. The vines, presiding like confident opera divas, can be read as surrogate self-portraits: the artist as survivor, clinging, still growing languishing in the dark and ultimately luxuriating in the light.

It is impossible to create paintings that incorporate glitter and paillettes without reference to the tawdry. However, Tanner's new work transcends cheapness and beams us up into a dizzying con-

templation of optimism amid loss and despair. At odds with much of today's work referring to the AIDS epidemic, an issue close to Tanner, these paintings refuse to reside in mourning and outrage. Instead they put forth a heady, occasionally mindless, optimism.

The big sequins in these pieces came to Tanner as a bequest—they were among the unused art materials of the late Arch Connelly. They serve partly as an homage to Connelly and his equally outré esthetic. The paillettes remind us that departed friends remain in our minds and works (in this case literally), but they also assert that life continues to permute itself endlessly.

Tanner's earlier pieces are darker with surfaces covered by a thick layer of plastic resin that contains and embalms the glitter. Here there is no plastic coating. The spangles are free to reflect and available to be touched; the impression is both more intimate and more immediate. Standing before the paintings, one wishes to weave back and forth just to see the glitter dance in the light. From the front, the large paillettes are uncomfortably bright, defying any paint to compete with them for brilliance. When seen from the side, they go dark—like black holes.

These highly reflective fields embody a gritty contemporary glamour. They are ideal, light-filled universes, made believable because they have grown out of the experience of theatrical illusion. They refer us back to what we found magical and miraculous as children, but they remind us it is a matter of individual will to experience it again.

—Robert Kushner