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Art in Review

By Roberta Smith

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KARL HAENDEL

Harris Lieberman

89 Vandam Street, South Village

Through Oct. 13

In his first New York solo, the young Los Angeles artist Karl Haendel makes good on his promising group show appearances. He gives free rein to his keen understanding of graphic power, visual scale and the play between mechanical and handmade reproduction. He also makes clear how public and private experiences are inseparable.

The show's title, "I Need Work," pinpoints Mr. Haendel's need to make things. The disparate images, scripts and repeating phrases in the drawings that dot the wall are united by an emphatic handling of one tool, the pencil, with occasional uses of white chalk. In works large and small, framed and not, he explores the plastic and linguistic possibilities of drawing.

In renderings of photographs and campaign stickers, he travels back through American history to the Democratic convention of 1980 ("Elect Jimmy and Fritz"). He converts family snapshots into pale grisaille, makes drawings of geometric forms that evoke both science and modernist abstraction, and creates especially large depictions of small objects on his studio drawing table.

He presents a long list of questions for his father: "Did you have any friends who died in Vietnam?" "Were there any black kids in your school?" One large chalk drawing on black acrylic simply repeats "Jesus Laughs" a dozen times in the fat, cheerful script of a drive-in restaurant.

The effect of all this is quite powerful, thanks to the dark velvety tones of the graphite, the waves of America's social and political history, and, above all, the sense of mental attention and personal urgency. Mr. Haendel has all sorts of debts -- Vija Celmins, Jack Goldstein, David Salle and Robert Longo, just for starters -- but this startlingly oppressive walk-in scrapbook stands solidly on its own.