

Jon Kessler

Review by David Rimanelli

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Jon Kessler's theatrical son-et-lumière contraptions do not advance theses; they are not, even in today's loose parlance, "conceptual." Though many of his works include elements that allude to technology, TV, sci-fi, and kitsch, it would be a serious mistake to locate their earnest gee-whiz tone within the media and commodity discourses that dominated art practice in the '80s. To suggest that, because Kessler relies on mechanical apparatuses in his works, they are hence "about" technology, the myth of progress, or the postindustrial era would be fatuous - rather like saying that because Bernini used marble his sculptures must be about geology. Kessler deploys his special effects either as displays of wit or as incitements to reverie.

For all its old-fashioned, antequy charm, the lumbering, complicated-looking dinosaur [Arts et Métiers](#) (Arts and sciences, 1989), which features, among other effects, a rhythmically weasing bellows, amounts to little more than a gratuitous racket. (Whether the gentle but ceaseless din is conducive to labeling slides and Xeroxing reviews or simply a modest nuisance to the gallery staff remains a matter of speculation.)

[Birdunner](#), 1990, consists of a small stuffed bird wearing a kind of toy crash helmet that is mechanically propelled up and down in front of a photo-mural of an upside-down metropolis by night. If this description seems convoluted, rest assured that the idea is painfully simple: the tweety-bird of the title is an ironically deflated replacement for the Harrison Ford character in the movie *Bladerunner*. Kessler might as well be poking his hapless viewer in the ribs. He depends too much on combined visual and verbal one-liners, and titles are indispensable to several works.

Those works that attempt to conjure a sense of melancholic reverie are in general more successful, perhaps because a loosely conceived "poetry" adequately blankets a paucity of ideas whereas a dopey joke does not. [American Landscape #2](#), 1990, consists of a wooden box in the shape of a '50s TV console. The foreground contains a model of a shacklike house with a mini-TV set as its floor. The set's static creates an ambient blue glow that emanates from a solitary window. The background is periodically illuminated to reveal a psychedelic horizon, suggesting either a dreamy fantasia or a toxic waste spill. Interpretive hooks are deliberately vague, but here, at least, the sci-fi enchantments are palpable, and the incitements to free-floating ruminations far richer.