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No Mixed Messages

A retrospective of David Kramer's reveals an artist with an unpretentious sense of humor

By Joe Bendik



Installation view of Kramer's "Untitled (Immediate Satisfaction)" at Armand Bartos Fine Art.

It's impossible to categorize artist David Kramer. He's been showing work for over 20 years, and his mediums include painting, sculpture, drawing, poetry and video. Kramer is a different kind of artist.

His social commentary almost always is from the artist's point of view (himself, really) and broaches the artist's continuous struggle for success. His often self-effacing sense of humor is what has set his work apart from a lot of other multi-media artist types. Beneath all of the paintings, installations and videos, what permeates the atmosphere is Kramer's unpretentious sensibility. There really is a universal truth that lays beneath the surface.

The Brooklyn-based artist has a retrospective exhibition at [Armand Bartos](#) titled, *Seems Like We've Been Down This Road Before*. It's a survey of works from 1989 to 2010, but it's really something else entirely.

The gallery is transformed into Kramer's states of mind: The space itself is delineated into two sections by Kramer's installation: "Untitled (Immediate Satisfaction)."

It's composed of a large green painting that resembles a 1960s cigarette advertisement from the era. The painting is hung on bare wall studs painted black (resembling bars) and includes a fully stocked bar cart lit from below. This creates a dense/confusing scenario, matching painting with the immediate environment.

Only upon hindsight does one get the full experience (since it is so embedded into the surroundings); this large installation becomes almost subtle. The painting is of a circa 1960s young, loving couple who are both smoking cigarettes and smiling while relaxing in the

countryside. It's all rather idyllic, however, the text belies the scene. On the upper right, the painted text reads: "IT SEEMS LIKE I'VE SPENT HALF OF MY LIFE TRYING TO GET IMMEDIATE SATISFACTION." The lower right corner counters with: "AND THE OTHER HALF COMPLAINING THAT I'M NOT GETTING ENOUGH OF IT." This is the essence of David Kramer's work—using multiple mediums simultaneously—but it is so down to earth that a viewer can forget that you're viewing art. His unselfconsciousness is his charm—and arsenal.

Kramer's evolution is hard-earned and wide-ranging. He started out in the 1980s as a painter and sculptor. Not limited to these forms, Kramer got involved in the poetry scene. This influence was transmuted into his visual art when he started using text in his works. The concept of text took on a life of its own. Kramer, after doing spokenword performances, then delved into film. His natural sense of the "leading man" makes his videos shine.

Videos include a silent film and "Ode To an Artist." For his silent film, he actually designed and built the furniture that the audience is encouraged to sit on and use. The retro seating draws the viewer into the film (a comment on the current art scene set back a hundred years ago). Kramer documents the artist's quest for greatness in a light-hearted way that carries much weight, and this exhibition consists of the ripe fruits of Kramer's labor.

David Kramer: Seems Like We've Been Down This Road Before, through July 30. Armand Bartos Fine Art, 25 E. 73rd St. (at Madison Ave.), 212-288-6705