

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

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Alex Bag

Elizabeth Dee Gallery
545 West 20th Street
Chelsea
Through March 27

As usual, Alex Bag's exhibition is long on raw talent, but strikingly lacking in the cooked kind. Although it requires too much reading, the most engrossing work is one that covers most of one long wall with overlapping drawings, diagrams, handwritten texts, newspaper clippings and Polaroids. It details the artist's twin obsessions with witchcraft and the American military-industrial-governmental complex, interspersing recipes for various magic spells, often written in Olde English, with disturbing facts and figures about Bechtel and Halliburton, especially the latter's involvement in the war in Iraq.

Teeming, strange information, enlivened by a slow-burning, satiric rage, makes this work seem like a mock-up for a good artist's book. Nothing else in the show has the same impact, including a finely drawn caricature of Rush Limbaugh and an acid yellow wall checkerboarded with painted images copied from illustrated books on magic.

The back gallery displays a 20-minute video parody of pornographic television shows. The commercials — most of them starring Ms. Bag — break only intermittently for the entertainment (excerpts from Paris Hilton's notorious tape) and it is amateur hour on both counts. Ms. Bag lamely demonstrates personal hygiene products, portrays Jessica Lynch as a stridently chipper Halliburton spokeswoman and, costumed as a witch, recommends anti-depressants for children, cackling, "Trust me with your child's nubile mind."

You keep waiting for things to become irresistibly funny, but they almost never do. Both Ms. Bag's comedic gifts and dark world view deserve much better material.

ROBERTA SMITH