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ARTFORUM

Stefan Nikolaev

GALERIE MICHEL REIN

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Return to Glory, 2005.

Bulgarian artist Stefan Nikolaev, a founding member of Glassbox, an experimental arts venue in Paris, has devoted this exhibition to that eternal, much-maligned icon: the cigarette. *Sickkiss*, 2006, a 35-mm film transferred to video (and the title of the exhibition), shows the upturned profile of an elderly man (actor Yoshi Oida) puffing on a cigarette against a black background. Slowly, an attractive young woman (Alexandra Surchadjeva), with an unlit smoke in her mouth, leans in toward him. The two cigarettes touch, hers lights up, and they separate, leaving behind a gray cloud of toxic fumes. The intense focus on face and gesture in *Sickkiss* inevitably recalls works by Bill Viola, but without their mystico-technological burden.

The rest of the installation is made up of objects—sculptures for floor, wall, and ceiling—that spin out an unlikely, and ever so quirky, marriage of the contrasting aesthetics of Pop art and Minimalism. A blinking red-and-white-neon target on black ground (*Lucky You*, 2005) calls forth a cigarette brand, but also Jasper Johns's and Kenneth Noland's own attachment to that simple, round sign. *Return to Glory*, 2005, a polished, black granite cigarette packet with gilded lettering sits on the floor like a Minimalist tombstone, while the laminated-wood *Table-Ashtray*, 2005, squats nearby. Hanging, blown-glass cigarette lamps and a filigreed, smoke-and-flame wall piece made of twisted neon tubes complete the display. Nikolaev simultaneously winks at the art-world's addiction to its heavyweights and advertising's construction of consumer desire, while imbuing decorative objects with satisfying irony.

—Vivian Rehberg

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