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ART

SCULPTURE

Anatomy of an Assassination

A presidential assassination sends a shock wave of horror across a nation. Contemporary artists and writers called upon to depict or describe it all too often resort to maudlin bathos or tight-lipped understatement. Years may pass before it can be viewed with anything like objectivity—and then the initial, highly emotional reaction may fascinate the historian as much as the event. On display in Manhattan's Dintenfuss Gallery last week was an exuberantly witty and challengingly mordant display of 52 paintings and collages anatomizing an assassination. Its extraordinary impact derived from the fact that the

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FRIEDENSOHN & "ASSASSINATION MACHINE"  
*Bridge between spectator and event.*

artist, Elias Friedensohn, 42, had chosen to examine the hysteria attendant on the death—not of John F. Kennedy in 1963, but of President William McKinley in 1901.

Like the *Last Supper*, McKinley was shot, while shaking hands in a receiving line in Buffalo, by a mentally unstable anarchist from Cleveland named Leon Czolgosz (pronounced chol-gosh). The trial ended with the prisoner's confession that he and he alone had done it; he was subsequently electrocuted. What fascinated Friedensohn was that "in every assassination, so many of the same elements recur. People always ask, 'Was there an accomplice?' 'Was the operation performed properly?' 'Were enough safety precautions taken?' And, after the assassination, there's usually a great deal of adulation for the dead President."

Employing a purposely florid Victorian style, Friedensohn has painted a

series of pictures that re-create the crime, diagram the paths of the bullets entering the body, offer a stiff-necked portrait gallery of the prisoner's—or possibly the victim's—family. Inaccurate and overwrought newspaper accounts of the murder are evoked by distorted and double-image pictures of it (one on a giant television screen). Doctors presiding at the operating table are shown poised over the body like apostles at the Last Supper. "Assassination," explains Friedensohn, "is like patricide, deicide. It provokes a religious awe in us."

**Shoot the President.** The courtroom, occupying half a gallery room, surrounds the spectator on four sides. Three of them are dark, oak-framed panels on which are painted the small robed figures of judge, jury, prosecuting and defending attorneys. The juridical figures are fitted out with identical, frog-like ceramic masks. Only the spectators, on the fourth wall, have a variety of normal human faces. In the center of the courtroom stands an ordinary old-fashioned oaken chair. "I want to make a bridge between the spectator and the event," says Friedensohn, "but an indeterminate one. I want him to think, 'Shall I sit in it or not?' So he'll be on the fence."

Visitors to the gallery are also invited to put a quarter in Friedensohn's gaily red- and gold-trimmed "Assassination Machine." They sight through a peephole into its interior, where a puppet President declaims, and pull the trigger of a cap pistol pointed at his tiny, bloody chest. Bang! goes the pistol. Why? asks the viewer. "Because," says Friedensohn cryptically, "it gives you a thrill."