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Art in Review

Ashley Bickerton
Lehmann Maupin Gallery
540 West 26th Street, Chelsea

Sonnabend Gallery
536 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through May 27

BY HOLLAND COTTER

It's easy to forget what natural-born moralists American artists are until you encounter someone like Ashley Bickerton. His work doesn't just wag a finger or propose reform. It offers a worldview that is basically an end-of-the-world view, beyond solution, beyond revulsion, blissed-out on the terrible wonder of it all.

He has been such an artist for a long time, and he's getting better and better at it, as demonstrated by these two gallery shows that include work since the 1980's. Twenty years ago Mr. Bickerton was producing wickedly funny sculptural pieces that suggested flotation devices for American consumer culture, the implication being that some great earth-cleansing flood was on the way.

It arrived in the piddling form of an art-market dip that left Mr. Bickerton's career, among others, high and dry. He moved out of New York, first to Brazil then to Bali, where he still lives. There he produced hyper-realist paintings of figures, including self-portraits.

These were so explosively, scathingly grotesque and hit out at so many targets as to defy exegesis. It was some of the most interesting painting any American was doing at that time. It made painting look like something worth doing

Some of Mr. Bickerton's recent work is almost as aggressively outré; some is just spooky. A series of mixed-media pieces done in collaboration with the Singapore Tyler Print Institute is in the latter category: images of green-skinned creatures rising from an oil-slicked sea littered with cans and bottles. His new paintings — of aging men in tropical

bars surrounded by bikini-clad women, every figure digitally inflated or squeezed — are something else again.

They are more than just a bad-trip update on sexual tourism. They are a partial but terminal response to the question Gauguin asked in the painting "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" Answer: This is what we are. We're going nowhere. This is the end of the line.

I have an additional question: Why is it still O.K. in art — you see this in various Chelsea shows at present — to make vicious cartoons of the female body? Mr. Bickerton happens to be an equal-opportunity offender: in his moral universe, everyone, man or women, is a sick joke. I think he's a fantastic artist, still just at mid-career, but my question stands.