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A lifelike hand makes suggestive little circling gestures aimed at the breast protruding from a fleshy wall marred by numerous bloody gashes. An erect penis with throbbing veins erupts out of the floor where a lone eyeball also floats. Christmas lights flash. A voice wails. A transparent person with painfully visible organs stands in the middle of it all.

A stock item from an S & M shop? The backdrop for a fraternity Halloween party? No, this is art, chosen by the curators at the Institute of Contemporary Art. In their current show they present the above work — Aimee Rankin's "The Flesh," part of her "Atrocities Series" of boxes you peek into, which also features pornographic playing cards of naked, bound women with real metal spikes thrust through them. In addition to Rankin's "Atrocities" the ICA is offering piles of glop that could be feces or vomit; paintings of mismatched body parts; and real birds in dimly lit cages, accompanied by a dual sound track: excerpts from Anne Frank's diary plus the confession of a Chilean torturer.

The content of this exhibition is no more disgusting than the concept is depressing. The show is part of an ongoing series called "Currents." Some of us wanted to forget "Currents." In case you succeeded in doing so, here's a brief refresher. This odd programming strategy, which the ICA first inflicted on Boston in 1982, consists of several small one-person shows that don't necessarily relate to one another, the idea being to present the diversity of contemporary art. Instead of the theme or thesis that binds most shows together, the message of "Currents" always seemed to be "Here's some stuff."

And instead of being simultaneous, these minishows used to come and go at different times, mimicking the frantic excitement of the art world and confusing audiences. Now all the little shows will be up together for the same length of time. This is a small step in the right direction, but can't compensate for the irresponsibility of "Currents," which confuses the curator's role, to sort through art and make some sense of it,



Rona Pondick's "Angel."

"CURRENTS" — At the Institute of Contemporary Art, through April 23. Organized by David Ross, Elisabeth Sussman, David Joselit, and Kathy Rae Huffman.

with the dealer's, to hang still-wet paintings and try to convince audiences they're looking at the art that will make it into the history books.

A wall text at the entrance to one ICA gallery insists that "Currents" artists are "not linked by any particular theme or medium." But this time, six out of seven of them are: Sculptor Dexter Lazenby, the lone Bostonian in the show, is the only one who doesn't deal in the grotesque. Showing Lazenby with this blood-and-barf bunch does a disservice to his work.

There is lots of powerfully unpleasant art around nowadays, but it tends to deal in global issues — AIDS, the destruction of the environment, nuclear holocaust, racial discrimination — and it tends to encourage activism, to awaken the complacent viewer. No such positivism results from "Currents," which is personal, insular, and dead-ended, with no work more claustrophobic than Chilean video artist Juan Downey's "About Cages." Set into a wall be-

hind wire are real caged canaries alternating with canaries on video monitors. The female voice reading from Anne Frank's diary alludes to a "songbird whose wings have been clipped" while the male voice playing the secret policeman talks about torturing a girl in a bathroom. The idea of being trapped is so obvious so fast that it has no lingering life.

Rankin's "Atrocities" and "Ecstasies" series are in sleek boxes with peepholes. Adding to the discomfort caused by the contents — rubbery ready-made gory kitsch — is the bent-over position the viewer must adopt because the boxes are hung so low. You'd get a backache from looking into them for long, but you won't want to do that anyway. While the "Atrocities" do startle, in a carnival chamber of horrors way, the "Ecstasies" merely bore. The one called "Perversity" looks like a late '60s college dorm room done up in peacock feathers, psychedelic patterns and fake flowers in deathly purple.

The kinkiness continues in Alan Turner's paintings of fleshy terrain sprouting *derrieres*, noses and eyeballs. In one painting, a sofa upholstered in a sprigged cloth a la Laura Ashley segues into a pair of lips holding a thermometer that registers 98.6, which is the only normal thing in

Turner's work. (Given the reheated surrealism that kills this work off from the beginning, it seems almost superfluous to add that as a painter Turner isn't very good technically.) In another work an undersized hand gropes toward a slit surrounded by wiry hair while a big eye stares at us staring at this tangled anatomy.

In the same gallery stands Lazenby's rough wood sculpture "Pilgrim," which has a long opening surrounded by linear grooves. "Pilgrim's" position in the gallery forces a comparison with Turner's vaginal imagery: That's a serious installation error that suggests a false interpretation of Lazenby's essentially abstract work. (If I were Lazenby's dealer I'd drum up a rescue mission and get his work out of the ICA.) Lazenby's sculptures — especially the hollowed-out wooden vertical "Resolute" — are the only beautiful pieces in "Currents." That's to be expected, of course: He's from Boston, a backwater that hasn't yet swallowed the with-it art-world view that beauty is banal.

Ray Smith's big paintings on wood offer surreal combinations of people, animals and objects, — bottles with human heads and so forth — that fail to provoke because the strategy is so tired. Painter Peter Nadin also recycles common ideas, mixing words, expressionist brushwork, landscape and still-life imagery, and three-dimensional objects in paintings about painting. "Still Life and Window" incorporates a framed still life of pears, surrounded by a copper-colored cord whose next stop is a fake, but three-dimensional, pear in a niche. The cord ends, with a celebratory frizz, with the word "and" written over a painted window. A couple of Nadin's paintings come with poetry handouts. One starts: "Bodies red ochre for burial or edible/Or just to keep the vermin away."

And now for the feces, in Rona Pondick's sculptures. Her free-standing wax "Mine" looks like a pile of excrement. Her cast lead "Puddle," which spreads over the floor, is made of a substance thick enough to form a vomituous mound. Her "Angel" combines dirty white pillows and hairy white turds. And her "White Bed" is a trio of long pillows, wide at one end, tapered at the other, suggesting mummified bodies. Lying on top of them is a long, skinny, bandaged thing, an undefined yuckiness. While much of the rest of "Currents" is oversimplified, silly or tired, Pondick's works are effective. They manage, through odd shapes and textures, to attract attention and then, at the point of recognition, to repel it.