

# ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

## KARIN F. GIUSTI NIKOLAI FINE ART

The White House has always been the focus of memorable scenes emblematic of American political administrations, from Jackie Kennedy's Camelot-era interior design schemes to the Clintons' grab for presidential housewares earlier this year (\$190,000 worth of china, flatware, rugs, televisions, and sofas they'd interpreted as personal gifts) and the Bushes' proposed renovations, which shed new light on Republican criticism of Democratic excess (\$430,000 to fix up the pool; \$75,000 for a kitchen floor that won't "leak grease" into offices below). The building is simultaneously a private and a public site, a prime-time television star (backdrop for *The West Wing*), a paradigm of official American architectural taste, and an edifice whose very name and plantation-like design conjure issues of race and historical inequities in this country. Recently it took on an even more sinister role: terrorist target. Structure, document, symbol, idea, the White House is ripe fodder for artists, though few have taken it as their subject. That, like many other things, may soon change.

Karin F. Giusti, who has been working on the "White House Project" since 1996, is ahead of the curve. Five years ago she exhibited *White House Greenhouse*, 1996, a large Plexiglas structure filled with plants, in New York's Battery Park and a similar piece, *The Green White House*, 1995, in Hartford, Connecticut. This recent show included a variety of works demonstrating the artist's wide-ranging treatment of the White House as a locus of domestic power and a clearinghouse for capitalist interests. Three works, collectively titled *Secret*, 2001, featured drawings on vellum and other ephemera layered in Plexiglas-and-wood cases: a letter from the Department of the Interior denying Giusti's request to take photos of White House architectural details; sketches of hieroglyphic-type symbols used by stonemasons to identify their work on the structure; and drawings of cornice carvings and moldings. Together,



Karin F. Giusti, *White House Greenhouse*, 2001, mixed media, 7½ x 15 x 9'. Installation view.

the bits and pieces Giusti collects and preserves suggest the different strata of life, activity, and power in the White House, along with the hermetic nature of everything from national security to masonry markings.

Other works—like the drawing *White House in Mourning*, 2001, showing the first residence draped in black, as it was following the deaths of Lincoln and Garfield (Jackie Kennedy nixed the tradition), and *Greenhouse Model*, 2001, a doll-size Plexiglas White House with brass-handled hatches on top and a black-and-white dollar bill superimposed inside—seem potentially interesting but are not quite fleshed out. In the small outdoor space behind the gallery, Giusti constructed a *White House Greenhouse*, 2001, that provided a glimpse of her earlier, larger installations. Surrounded by dime-store banners and American flags and filled with chrysanthemums and baby roses in plastic pots, Giusti's diminutive greenhouse suggested a downsized version of the American Dream, the chintzy reality available to Americans not validated by institutions of power. Giusti reminds us that the White House is more than just a physical structure: It's also a hothouse of activity, politics, and controversy. From today's vantage, her project seems outrageously (and quite innocently) domestic in scope, though her vain attempts to photograph the White House's architectural features seem to presage the imminent struggle Americans face between national security and civil liberty. It will be interesting to see how Giusti approaches her subject in the future, in the vastly different landscape of Washington—and the US—since September 11.

—Martha Schwendener