

▼ Art

Hollywood Babble On

Jack Goldstein's disappearing act

BY R.C. BAKER

With his aviator shades, shoulder-length locks, and blasé good looks, Jack Goldstein could have fronted some '70s band you don't quite remember. In actuality, the Montreal native who grew up in Los Angeles was part of the first graduating class at CalArts, where he fell under the sway of teacher John Baldessari. Eschewing classic visual training—"daubing away at canvases or chipping away at stone"—Baldessari favored theories of artistic self-effacement, appropriation of existing images, and other "post-studio" concepts. Late in his life, Goldstein (1945–2003) told an interviewer that Baldessari, though influential, "never gave me the nod at CalArts. I never thought he liked me." This retrospective at the

Jewish Museum proves Goldstein needn't have cared: In a wide-ranging career, he combined theoretical verbiage with a powerful aesthetic that eclipsed his more famous instructor's visual strategies.

In *A Reading*, an eight-minute color film from 1973, Goldstein breathlessly reads from a dense treatise—"Let us begin with the fact of irreversible, that is, determinate, order in time; we can see then that a one-dimensional space would not suffice to secure it"—as flames crawl down the page it is printed on. As one sheet burns completely away, with Goldstein's recitation barely outpacing the fire, another is lifted into the field of focus. Declaiming upon time and space while viscerally depicting their enmeshed nature, the film mixes conceptual wit with formal daring, ultimately coming across as a blend of screwball comedy and anxiety dream.

A few years later Goldstein hired film technicians to create a series of compelling shorts. In one, colored lights gently caress the reflective surface of a stainless-steel knife; in another, multihued feathers drift down before a dark background onto a chair that is at first barely discernible because of its coat of fresh black paint. Some of the feathers fall to the floor as the wet paint snags others, tacky moments of frozen gravity. In *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, the studio's name has been removed from its logo, leaving only the iconic lion on a

bright-red background, roaring and tilting his head in a continuous loop under a banner reading "Ars Gratia Artis"—art for art's sake. This sense of anticipation thwarted, of desire trapped, becomes a dominant theme. Always a writer, Goldstein would type up individual thoughts on single sheets of paper for his "Aphorisms" series: "The buzzing of the fluorescent lights is annoying me, but if I turn them off I won't be able to see"; "So this is glamorous Hollywood"; "The blind woman wears no make-up."

Then, in 1979, fellow CalArts grad David Salle sidestepped the conceptual jujitsu they'd honed at school and, as if confessing to a sordid affair, said, "Jack, I'm quitting . . . I'm involved in painting." Goldstein, who'd absorbed the death-of-painting mantra, later described his reaction: "I went *gulp*, and *boom*." In that theory-riven epoch, painting was suddenly seen as ripe for a critical rebirth, and Goldstein believed he would need to paint to make a living as an artist (video being a harder sell to collectors). So he used a trick he'd learned from Baldessari—"Displace your senses"—and applied his



Art for art's sake: Jack Goldstein's *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (1975)

appropriation skills to the ancient art form. He carefully chose photographs, such as an old *Life* magazine shot of the Nazis attacking Moscow at night, which his assistants, skilled in airbrushing and auto pinstripping, would dramatically scale up. Like a movie producer, Goldstein let the "talent" execute his concepts, to spectacular results—bold contrasts and stark lighting effects from the mix of fuzzy spray and hard-edge techniques made the canvases a hit with some abstract painters. Others, though, found them cold-hearted, one critic writing that she wouldn't mind "kicking" the work "to see if I could get any reaction out of it."

Despite his eclectic achievements, Goldstein, who had troubles with addiction, eventually retreated from the art world to what he described as a "burnt-down trailer" outside of Los Angeles. In the exhibition catalogue, one essayist notes, "Goldstein would seem the living embodiment of French poststructuralist theory." Which might partly explain why, at age 57, he hanged himself.

'Jack Goldstein x 10,000'

The Jewish Museum
1109 Fifth Avenue
212-423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org
Through September 29