

REAL GONE

THE CORNER MEDICINE CABINET

Damien Hirst's London restaurant

BY TYLER STALLINGS

I AM SITUATED ON AN ASPIRIN-INSPIRED BAR seat, inside a huge medicine cabinet. Outside, the façade of Pharmacy Restaurant + Bar, opened two years ago in the fashionable London neighborhood of Notting Hill by artist Damien Hirst, quotes the antiseptic qualities of medical architecture. A few people walk in off the street and try to fill prescriptions without success. Inside, the walls are made up of glass shelves stretching from floor to ceiling, with boxes and bottles of Prozac and Tylenol, among other pharmaceuticals, stacked in a horror vacui arrangement. You can see but cannot touch. Glass, transparent yet solid, creates distance.

Access is often denied in Hirst's large-scale works. He has a tendency to use human-size, steel-framed glass vitrines as containers — I'm sitting in one now, though one cast in the form of a restaurant. In smaller works, under the glass, one will find his representations of the marriage between life and death: a rotting cow's head consumed by maggots that grow into flies that then zoom into an electric insect incinerator. Mortality is most fascinating because it is unknowable while still alive. Hirst can seem like an Enlightenment scientist, breaking life's systems down into demonstrable parts, making visible the unseen. It is certainly clear that the couple next to me, dressed in Miu Miu and Gaultier, are here to be seen.

In London, people may not have seen Hirst's artwork, but they know his name from the publicity he has received over several controversies, namely the health hazards of displaying decaying flesh in public. Opening a restaurant is an experiment in measuring his celebrity beyond the art world proper. Will people sample his attributes? Like Nike Town, the environment he has created is more about selling himself as a "brand" than as a specific product. The more interaction with a brand, the more it becomes familiar. It seems that the waiter, however, has chosen not to interact with me. He has forgotten my tap water.

The pages of the menu are designed to look like a medical chart, which calls up not only childhood fears of needles but also the time I got to order ice cream after my tonsils were removed. The cover image is of a blue sky with white, puffy clouds, and a hovering piece of toast — manna from above. Drink specialties include "emergency ward 10" and "nurse's orgasm" (Smirnoff blue, crème de mure, cream and blueberries), perhaps equating the effects of pharmaceuticals and alcohol. Both, when ingested, alter one's senses. Yet such an embellished nomenclature is lacking among the solids: "steak & fries," "green salad."

The longer I sit here, the more I am reminded of the illusion of the sanctity of my body. We interact with chemicals in extraor-

dinary ways, ranging from hormonally enhanced hypermuscularity to lifestyle-changing birth control. Pharmacy acknowledges that design, fashion and art can go beyond the surface, can alter us on a deeper level. Chemicals move in and out of us with ease. Various man-made concoctions are a part of me, ones even less invasive than alcohol or prescribed medicine — Crest is on my teeth, Maalox floats in my stomach, Blistex coats my lips, and L'Oréal Mega Spritz styles my hair. Finally, my waiter arrives, with the attitude of a hospital orderly who has to clean up vomit. He has still forgotten my H₂O, though he has remembered the alcohol, a house wine called "pH."

The literal depth to which one can be altered is alluded to by another of Pharmacy's decorative motifs: a molecule graphic on the backs of chairs, on the cocktail coasters, on the bill at the end of the night, and as a sculpture on the upper floor, among elegant dining tables. You can see it from the sidewalk, behind a plate-glass window, like a specimen under an electron microscope. Optical devices, too, were developed during the age of Enlightenment. New corners of the world were seen, though they could never be touched.

It's late and my eyes are in pain from the cigarette smoke, still an indoor activity in London, and one often associated with hospital waiting rooms, though the



people there are usually less cheerful. I wish that I could slide back the glass doors for some Visine, but they are locked.

The final bill is delivered in a slender pouch. It is adorned with meteorological imagery as well, except that the weather has changed for the worse — the calm, blue sky at the beginning of the evening has been replaced with a lightning storm. Additionally, the toast that was suspended among the clouds like one of Hirst's sharks suspended in formaldehyde has been replaced with a snake graphic. It is entwined not around the Aesculapian staff, the symbol of the medical corps, but around a martini glass. It is Pharmacy's parting message. □