



James Lee Byars, "Golddust Is My Ex-Libris"

Michael Werner, through Sept 4



While James Lee Byars's Teutonic hero Joseph Beuys leaned heavily toward the unctuous and earthy in his boundary-crossing sculptures, the late American preferred more-luxurious, even precious, materials. A solo presentation at the Whitney in 2005 was centered on THE DEATH OF JAMES LEE BYARS, a room clad in gold leaf, containing a gilded sarcophagus. In the work's original presentation at a Brussels gallery, the artist lay on the floor in a gold lamé suit and black top hat "practicing death" before quitting the scene and leaving five crystals in his place. That combination of solemnity and ostentation was Byars in a nutshell, and his cultish devotees will recognize it in this exhibition featuring a single sculpture and a small group of works on paper.

In Byars's oeuvre, gold is an omnipresent but ambivalent symbol; its connotation of idealized beauty aligns it with the perpetually tantalizing elusiveness of the "perfect moment" and to the inevitability of death. In five small black-ink drawings on gilt discs or gold-leafed paper, Byars suggests this universal transience via a simple but effective gesture: He partially obscures phrases like PLEASE DON'T TOUCH with clusters of tiny stars.

The sculpture here, THE GOLDEN DIVAN (1990), is a 19th-century chaise longue that the artist has gilded and upholstered in sparkling—but uncomfortable-looking—gold fabric. Subtle it ain't, but it would be hard to conceive of a more memorable, or more Midas-like, image of the ultimate escape.—MICHAEL WILSON