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ART IN REVIEW; PAUL LEE

By Holland Cotter

Not to exaggerate the comparison, but it is possible to see the small assemblages in Paul Lee's first New York solo show as heirs to Robert Rauschenberg's early sculptural "combines" of the 1950s. The work of both artists takes debased found objects -- junk -- as primary material, and uses that material to create layered, enigmatic meanings. A big difference is that a homoerotic content suppressed in Mr. Rauschenberg's assemblage is the primary content of Mr. Lee's.

Many of the show's small sculptures are clusters of half-crushed beer or soda cans, each wrapped with a photograph of a young man's face in place of a label. On the gallery floor, a lighted blue lightbulb is nested among lumps of coal. A red bulb, attached to the wall, serves as a rack for a towel. Other towels hang, spread out, nearby. Their geometric color patterns make them look like soiled, frayed abstract paintings, but also like semaphore flags, each with a different message.

Gay coding, through dress, language and behavior, has long been a protective necessity, a cultural binder and a source of pleasure, in art no less than in life. Mr. Lee, born in London and in his early 30s, explores such coding, and gently prods its mechanisms without fully exposing and demythologizing them. He gives us the props associated with certain erotically charged environments -- back rooms, baths, parks -- but also preserves a quality of hiddenness, of mystery.

The gay liberation movement gave art and artists new options: before the late 1960s, subterfuge had been a necessity in art; after, it became a controllable and complicated choice. Mr. Lee's work is about that choice.