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[Alex Mar, The New York Sun](#)  
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Transforming a blunt concept into something surprisingly subtle and intelligent is no small trick. This is what has happened at the Swiss Institute, with the current group exhibition "Dust Memories".

It deals with "the invisible, the dirty, and the mystical material of dust." It's a phenomenon we can all understand: the physical residue of living, detritus, the stuff we brush off, sweep up, and are generally in denial about. As the artist Jean Dubuffet, quoted in the statement accompanying the show, wrote, "I am more curious about the elements that, by being so widespread, are usually for that very reason shielded from view." Dust is also what we collect in the form of relics, history, evidence. You could say it's what we fill our museums with.

Opened in 1986 as a for-the-Swiss-by-the-Swiss non-profit venture, the "SI" has since evolved into an international art center with no affiliation with the Swiss Government (although the ambassador *is* the honorary chairman). "Dust Memories" is a follow-up to its spring group show "Extra," which asked with pulp melodrama, "How many layers can we graft onto reality before it collapses?"

Two recent works by young Texan Dario Robleto are among the strongest stuff here. "Skeleton Wine" (2002) stands neatly on a small shelf: It's the kind of elegant moonshine jug filled with home-made wine and made from cast and carved bone - which includes dust from every bone in the human body. In a deliberately rusty, antique script is written the phrase, "Drink Yourself to Sleep."

More extraordinary residue is featured in Cornelia Parker's "Exhaled Blanket" (1996): pressed into a slide and projected across two walls are dust and fibers from Freud's couch (has a piece of furniture ever gotten more mileage?). I had to acknowledge a certain curiosity about these traves of history: caught up in the threads of that couch are, perhaps, remnants of the period suits or skirts of some of the patients whose diagnoses helped shape how we view the modern mind. At least - and this is part of the smarts of this show -there's weird pleasure in imagining this to be true.

Of course, there's dirt from the common as well. Michael Ross's "The Smallest Type of Architecture For the Body Containing the Dust From My Bedroom, My Studio, My Living Room, My Kitchen and my Bathroom" (1991) is a thimble stuffed full of hairy-looking dust, hung on the wall at eye level. And Jonathan Horowitz's very funny video, "Je t'aime" (1990) helps to further immortalize the cigarette: It's a loop of a lit cigarette, in close-up, tacked to a bright blue wall. The viewer can watch it burn down to the butt, again and again, as Serge Gainsbourg croons the completely over-the-top song.

One surprise is Jordi Colomer's short video "Pianito" (1999), installed on a small monitor which peers down over the back space. In sepia-like tones, a weird little Gothic scene plays out: a bald young man, dressed in muted colors, smokes with casual confidence while playing out notes on an absurdly dusty piano. After every few notes, he uses his free hand to vigorously sweep another layer of chalky dust off the instrument's surface, or leans in to blow across the piano top or the shade of the small lamp. A close-up reveals that he's miming: The keyboard is a crude block of plaster, and perhaps it's plaster dust that covers everything in the scene. Mr. Colomer touches on the "genre" qualities of dust, its relation to the horror of Poe and Vincent Price alike.

Jonathan Monk's "Empire (After Andy Warhol In Reverse)" (2002) is apparently in response to Warhol's 1964 film, "Empire"- you know, the silent, 8-hour stationary shot. Monk projects a touristy, 1950s color slide of the Empire State Building onto the wall, with the intention that it be shown until the slide degenerates. The hairs caught in the projector vibrate, and the edges of the image have already begun to grow dark. The colors are oddly of another time, with little relationship to contemporary photography. The image itself is a remnant of another period, as well as a reminder that all architecture will sometime end in dust.



Swiss Institute Contemporary Art

38 St Marks Place  
New York, NY 10003

+1 (212) 925-2035  
info@swissinstitute.net

swissinstitute.net  
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