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Stein Greben, Deidre. "Strolling Under the Swimming Pool," *ARTnews*, June 2000.

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Strolling Under the Swimming Pool

Leandro Erlich's installations invite you to walk underwater or stick your hand through a mirror • BY DEIDRE STEIN GREBEN

I've been testing pumps and showerheads for months," said Leandro Erlich, a self-confessed Home Depot junkie. Covered in sawdust, he was standing on a brown-papered floor littered with nails, discarded pipes, strips of molding, drill bits, and half-filled paint cans. Sheets of clear plastic were hung across the doorways. It looked like the gritty, chaotic scene of a home-remodeling project.

The 27-year-old Argentine-born artist was actually working in the usually pristine space of SoHo's Kent Gallery. He was hammering out technical kinks in *Rain*, an installation he was preparing for the Whitney Biennial (where it is on view through the fourth of this

In building his deceptively ordinary environments, Argentine-born artist Leandro Erlich (below) makes endless trips to the local Home Depot.

month). Wearing black sneakers, dark corduroy pants, and a flecked gray sweater worn through at the elbows, Erlich was working largely in the dark—which is where he aims to keep his viewers.

Erlich builds deceptively ordinary environments—a dingy alleyway, an apartment-house corridor as seen through a peephole, an elevator, a swimming pool.

Unsuspecting viewers immediately feel comfortable in these familiar settings, but their expectations are gradually subverted, and they are forced to question what is illusion and what is real. "Donald Judd meets Magritte" is how Michael Auping, chief curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and a curator of the current Whitney Biennial, characterizes Erlich. "What struck me when I first saw his work is how intelligently it combines the minimalist sensibility with the surreal.

"A lot of sculpture is becoming more illusionist," Auping observes, "and Erlich's is among the best." But the artist insists that the conceptual underpinnings of his work and his search for the unique in the commonplace align him more closely with Duchamp. In *Rain*, which debuted last year at Houston's Moody Gallery, painted Sheetrock walls trimmed with molding and wainscoting, materials that typically define an interior, instead form an exterior and enclose a narrow brick-lined space, like an alley between tenement buildings in New York, where Erlich lives, and in his native Buenos Aires. The viewer looks through nondescript house windows into the enclosure, where an invisible water tank, multiple nozzles, strobe lights, and a finely tuned sound system simulate a downpour. The effect is mesmerizing—the soothing sound of water hitting the sills and trickling through gutters, rolls and then claps of thunder, flashes of light that suspend droplets in enticing abstract patterns. With its reversals of space and contrived naturalness, *Rain* is also decidedly unsettling.

What makes Erlich's visual trickery work is his flawless presentation. All the seams are hidden. Nothing is labored. *The Swimming Pool*, a 1998 installation currently in the group show "Natural Deceits," at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (through September 10), beckons viewers to dip in their toes. Others wander below the chlorinated blue water's surface. Curiously, the apparently submerged spectators



are not holding their breath—though they may be tempted. Near the top of the pool, which is actually empty, is a sheet of clear Plexiglas that supports just a few inches of water—enough to allow a pink ball and a yellow foam floater to bob about. A metal ladder emerges from below, ostensibly providing access.

For *El Living*, or *The Living Room* (1998), which has been shown in Houston, Madrid, Buenos Aires, and New York, Erlich re-created an inviting space done up in the classic modern furnishings characteristic of middle-class Argentina. On the wall, opposite a beige couch, hang two framed mirrors—or so viewers believe, until they notice that they are not reflected in one of them, although the rest of the room seems to be there. The illusion is so persuasive, one critic said, that “you have to put your hand through the opening to convince yourself of the truth.” Erlich created another space beyond the “mirror” in which he painstakingly replicated all the furniture and knick-knacks, including a Warhol poster and a clock with its numbers flipped and hands ticking in reverse.

“People have walked into *The Living Room*, commented on the décor, and then left. They never find out about the mirror, and that’s okay,” says Erlich. “I want to guide their experience, not control it.”

To that end, he uses genuine building materials and constructs his work at life-size scale. *Elevator* (1995), purchased by Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts, is an inverted rendition of an old elevator cabin. The push-button controls are on the outside of the rectangular, boxlike structure, while mirrors placed inside at the top and the bottom, viewed through an old-fashioned iron gate, give the sense of a seemingly endless shaft. “A lot of people say they experience vertigo when they look at the piece,” the artist says, with satisfaction.

Erlich traces his interest in fabrication to the frequent visits he made to construction sites with his architect father. His parents—his mother is a geologist—wanted him to earn a professional degree, so he enrolled in a local art college after graduating from high school in 1989, but left after a year. “I



ABOVE Spectators walking beneath the water's surface in *The Swimming Pool* curiously don't hold their breath.
BELOW A viewer in search of his reflection in *The Living Room*.

found it boring,” he says. “It was all very traditional. There was no room for experimentation.” He eventually found that room in Houston, at the Glassell School of Art.

There, he was not only encouraged, but also given the means and the space to realize his ideas. The school’s yearly show of work by its so-called Core artists also provided him with a conduit to major galleries and collectors. Erlich began showing with Kent in 1998. According to the gallery’s director, Doug Walla, the prices for his work range from \$10,000 to \$50,000.

Erlich is currently collaborating with Argentine artist Judi Wertheim on a work that will appear at the Havana Biennial in November. It will center on the theme of the tourist, an unfamiliar concept to most Cubans, he says, and will feature a snowy mountain-top setting where ordinary people, outfitted with ski equipment and outerwear, will pose for Polaroid snapshots. As with much of his work, it will be like a stage set, with special effects. But Erlich leaves the finishing touches to his audience, which paradoxically assumes the leading role. “Until the viewer participates, until he interacts with it,” he says, “the work isn’t done.” ■

Deidre Stein Greben is a senior editor of ARTnews.

