Dan Mills
Sybil Larnay Gallery
952 W. Lake St., 312/829-3915

For the past few years Chicago gallery owners have demonstrated a steadily growing interest in the affordable rents and adaptable industrial spaces of the Randolph Market area. Last October, after testing the waters for two years, the Sybil Larnay Gallery set up shop one block north of the market in a neighborhood that may still be a little raw for some. The proximity of this well-defined, second-floor exhibition space to the urban realities outside its doors proved the perfect setting for Dan Mills’s “Urban Building Facades.”

Mills’s found-wood constructions offer poignant commentaries on the process of urban renewal. His materials—splintered lengths of finishing molding caked with layers of “ghetto green” enamel paint, brittle laths, dusty battered planks, and bits of signboard salvaged from the gutted interiors of dilapidated buildings—are the artifacts of changing social, economic, and political histories.

Distilled from the architectural features of actual buildings, Mills’s facades, with their sometimes sagging cornices scarred with the pentimenti of deteriorated decorative details, are intimate, brooding portraits of melancholy and despair. Rectangular wall-hung panels, each measuring about three feet by five feet, they seem fixed in the blind stares of their boarded up windows. They are, in fact, very much like death masks.

Initially this group of five works was displayed in an outdoor show at Randolph Street Gallery, where, for three months, they were spiked to the front of a building which served as one of the models for a piece in the series. Contrasting with their weather-beaten look, the artist has applied several layers of subtle translucent color that puddle along the edges of chipped paint into the crevices of the dried wood to create a discrete elegance on their brutalized surfaces.

The theme of physical and moral decay runs throughout Mills’s show, but works such as the triangular Big Long Faced Facade, and the squat Low Brow, add a humorous touch. These play off the similarities often found between the facades of buildings and human faces. Overall, there is something of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in Mills’s work, as he reclaims form, beauty, and even memory from the outrage and chaos of abuse and destruction. This was a powerful and often poetic exhibition.

Price range: $800 to $3,500.

Garrett Holg