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Smith, Roberta: Marking Their Mark

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# Making Their Mark

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The Rudolf Stingel exhibition at the Whitney encourages something unusual for a museum: audience participation.

Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

**By Roberta Smith**

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Since Rudolf Stingel's sleek midcareer survey opened at the Whitney Museum of American art in June, hundreds of visitors have been allowed to depart radically from traditional museum protocol (hands off) and have a go at the walls in the exhibition's first gallery, using anything they happen to have with them: pens, money, credit cards, cellphones.

To accommodate such graphic urges, the large space was lined with shimmering, foil-covered Celotex insulation board, which is easily punctured with just about anything, even fingernails. When the show opened, the foil board covering the lower half of the walls was untouched; the upper half was a riot of graffiti, bas-relief carvings, patterns and drawings created during the show's first stop, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

Over the intervening months New York's art-viewing public rose to the occasion: The room's lower half is now equally dense with a kind of populist, manic, talking-in-tongues wallpaper. It makes the Metropolitan Museum's Temple of Dendur, incised by a couple of centuries of tourist comments, look positively virginal.

It helps that the bits of remaining silver foil glint in the light from a large, genuine cut-crystal chandelier in the center of the ceiling (also foil-covered, but untouched). The contrast is probably part of the point: they represent two extremes of craftsmanship, beauty and fragility.

In some contexts, of course, this project would be vandalism. Yet here it is just one more strategy for a Conceptually inclined artist with a strong penchant for provocative, unpredictable ways of painting. He has also produced kits for people to make abstract paintings that are Stingels. As of tomorrow afternoon, when the exhibition ends, the foam board is a Stingel painting (or mural) too. It will be carefully preserved for future use, perhaps as a frieze above another graphic free-for-all.

Blame Jackson Pollock's drip technique for Mr. Stingel's latest excursion into hands-off painting. His hands, at least. **ROBERTA SMITH**