



Paul Thek



Alexander & Bonin, through Feb 21

Throughout his career, Paul Thek (1933–1988) suffused his art with a self-awareness that acknowledged the sad strangeness of being alive. The works in this show, titled "Ponza and Roma," are no exception, even though they were created in the 1970s during a sojourn in Italy that might have otherwise been considered idyllic.

In a series of paintings on newsprint, placed behind Plexiglas-like dried parchment, current events peek through gestural marks depicting a chance assortment of subjects—an eggplant, a mirrored pair of hammer and sickles, a grapevine. Thek was fond of random lists, seen, for example, in *Untitled* (self-portrait, tomato, island). His

diaries (exhibited reliquary-style in vitrines) are similarly filled with disconnected recollections of roaming Manhattan, enjoying a pineapple drink at Nathan's, buying grapes at Balducci's or being pained by the exquisite face of a boy born with thalidomide-induced defects. Each passing moment is worth recording as Thek channels



Untitled (Eggplant)

banal facts into romantic longing. He sought a tender equanimity between symbol and object, self and world, wound and beauty.

The show's more straightforward landscape paintings and drawings follow suit. They're not just pictures but documents of a life lived, of things once seen but now gone. A beautiful day at the beach dies, because it's no longer visible to the eye.

In another diaristic entry, Thek, "interviewing" himself, responds to the question: What is your favorite animal? His answer: human. In his hands, art is a lament but also an affirmation, a kind of journalism that says, I was here, this is what I witnessed.

—Jennifer Coates