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ART IN REVIEW

'SOFT MACHINES'

By KEN JOHNSON

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Pace Gallery

545 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through Aug. 26

On opening night of this unfocused, intermittently interesting group show Kate Gilmore and four other women in similar floral print dresses attacked a big block of wet clay. They tore off hunks and threw them against nearby walls. Increasingly tired by the task, they continued for three hours until the clay was gone from its pedestal. Thus with crushing obviousness they burlesqued feminist rage, avant-garde performance and Modernist process and self-reference.

A more affecting performance is in a video by the Chinese artist Ma Qiusha, who describes how her parents relentlessly pressured her to succeed as an artist, beginning when she was a child. She ends by removing a bloody razor blade from her mouth.

The most visually striking work is a painting by Holton Rower. It

resembles a slice of a giant old tree whose annual rings have been psychedelically colorized. Mr. Rower makes his paintings by a process of pouring, which you can see in a captivating YouTube video.

Elsewhere the mercurial Sterling Ruby offers a mural-scale wall sculpture in the form of two cartoon mouths with pointy teeth dripping gobbets of blood. Made of stuffed stars-and-stripes patterned fabric, it looks as if it had been designed for a Bread and Puppet theater production.

Paul Pfeiffer's "Desiderata," from 2004, still holds up. A video running on a small DVD player shows individual people standing uncertainly on the flamboyant sets of television game shows from which all others present have been erased. It is a haunting reflection on soul-starving, contemporary entertainment.