Review: Carsten Holler at Gagosian Gallery
12:00 PM, February 19, 2009

Carsten Höller makes sculptures and installations designed to destabilize and disorient. The Belgian-born, Stockholm-based Höller makes his solo debut in Los Angeles with an uneven show that, at its best, nudges a level of wonder.

An acid-green baby deer quietly curled up in a corner at Gagosian Gallery certainly does that. Glinting brown eyes and hooves of actual horn yield a level of realism that collides with the outrageously phony color, which seems magical or irradiated, depending on your frame of mind. This gentle creature is either a fairy-tale miracle or nature in its final, poisoned death rattle.

The back room holds a trio of aluminum suitcases opened on the floor beneath high-powered hanging floodlights, as if grow lamps have been trained on a businessman’s baggage. Step closer, and solar panels within the suitcases are shown providing electrical power for a couple dozen amanita mushrooms — the white-spotted, deep-red toadstools whose psychoactive ingredients can, depending on the circumstance, cause hallucinations or death.
Dotted with sparkly crystals, the mushrooms are gaily spinning. Höller’s ensemble is like something from James Bond by way of Disney, with a bit of the Brothers Grimm thrown in for good measure. Tight rationality and wild release are opposed as optimal states of existence.

Upstairs, a suite of large photographic collages mounted on aluminum shows a willowy young nude with cascades of strawberry blond hair engaging with reindeer. The Botticellian Venus offers them mushrooms, while the photographic color-separations on both girl and beast go out of whack, surrounding them with rainbow hues. Produced like a frivolous fashion spread, the serious pictures thrive on ambiguous impulses.

The weak link in the show is a pair of 7-foot acrylic spheres, a red one suspended and a black one resting on the floor. Double layers of acrylic are pierced with holes, and clear- or frosted-glass light bulbs inside the spheres flash at seemingly random intervals. You get the feeling they’re supposed to be hypnotic, knocking you off your routine. Instead, they just look overproduced.

-- Christopher Knight

Gagosian Gallery, 456 N. Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, (310) 271-9400, through Saturday.

Top: "Reindeer" (2008), polyurethane, glass eyes, horn; bottom: "Mushroom Suitcase" (2008), nine Amanitas (polyurethane, red acrylic paint, mirrors), aluminum suitcase (foamed plastic, solar panels, electrical motor, aluminum support, cable). Credit: Gagosian Gallery