

ARTISTWRITER™ 32

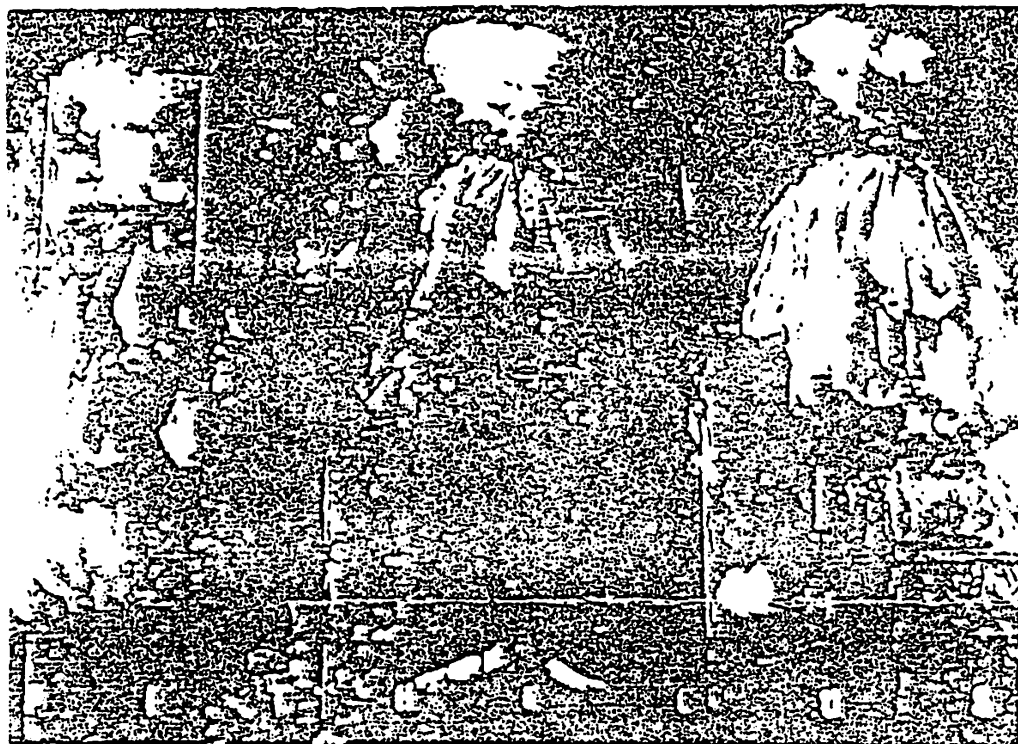
Todd Murphy
Beverly Rayner
Alexis Smith

by Salli McQuaid

Mystery

unifies the work of Atlanta artist Todd Murphy, Monterey artist Beverly Rayner and Los Angeles artist Alexis Smith. The exhibition, *Transitional Realities* at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara until April 18, was curated by George Rivera and is the second of a series exploring reality in art. The first, *Figurative Realities: Beyond the Form* (1990), dealt with fairly straightforward figurative and narrative work by Californians Domenic Cretara, John Nava and Patricia Wickman. In *Transitional Realities*, the viewer is invited to observe "the existence of more subtle and obscure aspects of reality." The works in this exhibition are indeed obscure. They are, however, works that invite contemplation.

Perhaps the most exciting of the works on view are those by Todd Murphy, who made a splash at the opening of the Lowe Gallery in Santa Monica last year, which drew attendees in the hundreds, maybe even thousand(s). It



Todd Murphy: *Femmes of Red Clay Poetry* (detail), mixed media, 144" x 240"

also drew the rich and the famous, who, struck by the size, imagery and sensitivity of Murphy's work, laid out five digit sums for it. The exhibition also gave Murphy exposure in the *Los Angeles Times* and established art journals such as *Art in America*.

Murphy's (and Rayner's and Smith's) reception at the Triton Museum was not as well attended. The crowd probably numbered in the low hundreds, although it was perhaps more volatile (a noted art critic and well-known San Jose artist almost duked it out amidst the art) and definitely less flattering. At least one person, for example, remarked that Murphy's exceedingly large-scale works were unduly pretentious. Murphy has a 10,000 square foot studio, which affords him the ↗

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Mystery (from p. 1)
 opportunity to work on a gigantic scale in any direction. The studio is described as somewhat of a wreck by one Georgia author. "In Atlanta," says Murphy, "space is cheap."

Probably any works that are 12 by 17 or 12 by 20 feet — not inches — would be imposing. Have you ever looked up into the face of a seven foot plus collegiate basketball player? That's imposing.

But the efficacy of Murphy's work goes beyond size. There is a subtlety, a balance and a use of imagery in his work that has haunting European, in particular French renaissance and Edgar Degas, connotations. Perhaps it's the influence of the damp and heated South, incubator for great novelists, that foments his work. Murphy, a displaced Windy City native, says living in the South is where he's comfortable — and where he can best create.

While the viewer may be comfortable with Murphy's esthetics, there is a certain discomfort with his overall imagery, not necessarily a negative attribute. Just what is this artist trying to say? In *Femmes of Red Clay Poetry* (photo, page 1), Murphy's technique in certain small areas resembles the paintings of Bay Area painter Rebyrn Smith. In other areas of this predominantly dark piece, burgundy, teal and deep yellow are added. The central figure on the left has the head of a bear, and it

presents, like an announcement, a football-size egg. The work is composed of huge photographs enhanced with paint and layered under various sheets of Plexiglas. Just what is this artist trying to say? Murphy says he works intuitively.

Primavera (152"x 156") hosts painted mannequins and bouquet of dried flowers, and sticks out from the wall at least a foot. To reach the flowers, the viewer can open a hinged Plex door. Red letters spell out the nonsensical word POLIPHONOUS across the bottom of the painting. A woman sits in a chair, her nude back facing the viewer.

Another nude back faces the viewer in a more threatening work by Beverly Rayner: *Woke up on a bed of nails: love, death, fear, sorrow* (photo, page 4). Rayner is regarded as one of the Bay Area's strongest emerging young artists. Qualities that separate her work from the pack are an acute sense of esthetics and a Stephen King sense of the horrific. Rayner's esthetic precision is rivaled only by that of native American artist Truman Lowe. Both artists place objects with uncanny precision. Rayner uses found, weathered and recycled materials, many of which are threatening, such as thorny cacti and cacti, to convey mystery and horror. Lowe uses natural materials such as polished rock and color-washed and sanded wood, conveying serenity and peace.

Anti-war, not peace, is the message of several of the assemblage wallpieces of Los Angeles pro Alexis Smith, who has ventured from dada to the conceptual and back again throughout a phenomenal 20 year career. Smith proves in this particular body of work that her work is not getting older, but better, dealing irreverently and incisively with political and social issues.

All the simple old-fashioned charm of a cop beating up a drunk are words (cont. p. 6)

Editorial

uncensored

Artist Writer in its present form is most often labeled a newsletter, but it is not a newsletter. It is a serious publication dedicated to noncommercial, uncensored and unusual exposure for the arts. We are not public relations people.

As a writer covering the arts since 1975, I discovered that much of the writing I did had to be publicly related: please the advertisers, make money, and if there's no money in it, don't bother. I cannot count the times I requested covering shows by artists who did not represent big name, big money or big area and was refused. Worse, writing I submitted was diluted by editors to flatter my subject because advertisers (and often subjects) cannot accept critical work; humor was edited out because "humorous work is not serious;" prose was altered to match the editor's writing style. In short, the reader was getting flattering, stylized tripe.



As intelligent or learned as tripe may or may not sound, it is still tripe, and if you prostitute your integrity and abandon your sense of play, what is left? I began *Arts Writer* as a vehicle for unviolated, real work. Although goals are to pay our writers and to cover our costs, our focus

is not to make money or even to please. We strive to produce a quality product that is experimental, fun and honest. Unlike other art publications, our coverage is not devoted strictly to the establishment, established writers or even to what is labeled "the cutting edge." Although many of us are ostracized by the establishment, we will not ostracize the establishment. We will remain open to all people — tried or untried — who speak the truth through their art.

Mystery (from p. 1)

plastered across the seat and the title of Smith's "mixed media, actual chair" piece. The sculpture is a departure from Smith's collaged wallpieces, which comprise the remainder of her works in the show.

Deciphering Smith's wallpieces is a little like reading a mystery thriller, only the reader has to provide the conclusion. Her *Boy's Life* provides the clues to a boy's life before it was aborted by the Viet Nam War. In the macabre *Spectre*, an ornate granite frame — like an oval tombstone — surrounds a painted-by-number clown. Imposed on the clown is a portion of a skeletal cranium and spine torn from a newspaper or magazine. Sticking out of the clown's pointed hat is a white plastic Veterans of the USA poppy. Words on *Spectre* say, "I wasn't scared, I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost."

The remainder of Smith's works address in