

Camera to Canvas in San Francisco

PAINTOGRAPHY

"Shudder" at Victoria Room and Todd Murphy at Haines Gallery

By Dean Smith

There is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds.

— Robert Smithson

"Art Through the Camera's Eye"

In his brief and witty essay on photography, Robert Smithson begins with a lament on the devouring nature of the photographic image as conveyor of pictorial "truth" in relation to the culture of fine art (*viz.* painting). Given this aesthetic ennui, each generation of artists since photography's birth has had to come to terms with this unpleasant (or, depending on your predilection, pleasant) fact. Should artists ignore or integrate the camera's eye into their particular mode of production?

In the recent group show entitled "Shudder" artists of differing temperaments were seen approaching the photographic medium as a means of augmenting their creative explorations. But the photographic siren song that has lured these individuals is not the creation of the original print *per se*, it is the use of the extant image. "Shudder's" artists ask through various means, be they political, personal, or conceptual, if recycled, salvaged images freed from the chains of previously inscribed meanings and contexts can convey new sets of possibilities.

Teresa Smith boldly treads into the politicized morass of Queer sexual pleasure (given hysteria over homosexual desire and the AIDS crisis). She appropriates porn images from straight, lesbian and gay publications and presents, via the lesbian gaze, the world of a guiltless, omnisexual pleasure-seeker. Constructions such as *Tight Pussy* or *Glory Hole* wed steel and porn into a charged interplay between structural austerity and in-your-face content. If Smith explores the body as a site for pleasure, then Curtis Cravens sees such a body as fodder for the mass media. Cravens amasses portraits of contemporary political figures rephotographed, on small hand-sized lumps of paper, into boxes or a pile in a corner which comment, tepidly, on the product-like quality of world leaders.

From the sphere of the body politic to that of the individual, Dean Byington's enormous photo-collages mounted on stretched canvas represent deeply personal, albeit historically mediated, narratives. Culling disparate photographs from the 19th century (which through various processes are enlarged and layered), Byington's saturnine mises en scène, such as *The Reader*, mimic the conventions of Salon history paintings; however, Byington's melancholic

temperament eschews ennobling sentiment in favor of fin-de-siècle dysphoria. Augusta Huggins-Meyers also explores personal narrative in large photo-murals that incorporate found or original photographs mounted on loose canvas. The effect recalls tapestries — tapestries which detail the intimate objects of a life.

The salvaged motion picture stock that Linda Darling manipulates pushes "Shudder's" recycling premise to its most extreme conclusion. Using 8 and 35mm film strips Darling proceeds to cut, weave, bleach, and layer the film in a meditation on process. The resulting structures seem like paintings that have weathered some radical metamorphosis. In *Inner Space*, tiny, nearly inscrutable spliced film frames are taped together to form a large irregular shape resembling nothing so much as a hide from some undiscovered species of reptile. Finally, J. Anderson's deadpan conceptual photos (tinged with a whimsical humor) of garage-attendant shirts and linoleum floors represent the only work that falls outside the category of "Shudder's" premise.

★ Atlanta-based Todd Murphy's recent body of work entitled "The White Paintings," also explores the fringes of the photographic medium. Like Byington's and Huggins-Meyers', Murphy's work is generally massive and his narrative mediated by personal and historical factors. Under large sheets of plexiglas (crudely fastened with screws to a stretched canvas support and caked in tar and oil paint) can be seen photographic tableaux of isolated objects (porcelain cups, baroque chairs) or men in white embroidered dresses performing stylized actions. All emerge from the darkness lit as if by spotlight on an empty stage.

A forced historicism pervades Murphy's work, along with the implication of genteel, southern decay. However, a penchant for (art-)historical allusions does not constitute a dialogue with history; it is merely quotation. If Byington's work engages a particular period in order to address the present, Murphy's historicity is just another coating applied like the tar and oil. It is the crouching figure in *Untitled (Microphone Man)* turning toward the blackness, attempting to communicate (via a '40s-era headset and microphone) with Murphy's trademark void, that made for the show's most haunting note. ■

Dean Smith is an artist and art writer in the Bay Area.

Installation view of "Shudder"

