



Woke up on a bed of nails: An assemblage by Beverly Rayner

sonalities who fashion themselves to be larger than life.

In all of these staged enigmas, the image of a dressmaker's dummy or woman stripped to the waist and skirted in a crumpled, billowing gown appears, and all are layered in rectangles of Plexiglass that further obscure the shadowy picture.

Murphy likes to add to the effect of mystery by painting or stenciling words ostensibly unrelated to the visual imagery on top of the Plexiglass, usually of a variety so arcane as to escape direct definition in the Oxford English Dictionary.

While Murphy's manipulations of chiaroscuro and subtly rich tinting are indeed beautiful, the artist's palette is not the only source of the works' dark flavor. The headless female dummies and the faceless real women, assembled from painted, torn strips of collaged photographs, represent the female form in a manner that feels disembodied and dehumanized, stripped of power as well as anatomical parts.

This disturbing undercurrent is accentuated in *Femmes of Red Clay*

Reality in Flux

The new show at the Triton looks three ways at the 'real'

TRITON MUSEUM OF ART Curator George Rivera has put together a show that is not merely designed to elicit viewer participation—but absolutely requires it. *Transitional Realities* presents the work of three artists—Santa Cruz's Beverly Rayner, Atlanta's Todd Murphy and L.A.'s Alexis Smith—who traffic in what might be labeled "The Inescapable Obscurity of Meaning." Whether it's fascinating, unbearable or just plain vexing is, naturally, a matter of individual inclination and mood.

Rayner's work is probably familiar to most local art followers, several of the pieces on display at the Triton having been shown at other galleries in the area. In these works, Rayner uses soft-focus, black-and-white or sepia photographs set in a variety of found objects or crafted enclosures in such a way that one must peer inside or approach the piece from a particular angle in order to see it, thus mimicking the process of memory or the selectivity of personal perception.

In the newer works, Rayner makes a much more direct statement. In *Murderers of dreams*, she has taken a photo album full of black-and-white snapshots of little girls circa the early 1950s and im-

through desiccated, blood-red rosebuds, displaying the open book atop an old retablo resting on a wooden lion's head. While the degree of autobiography versus social commentary—or of metaphor versus literalness—is unknowable, the dramatic impact is undeniably disturbing.

Smith creates ironic assemblages marrying memorabilia and pop-culture images with snippets of text extracted from the likes of Kerouac, Steinbeck and Chandler. The informed humor in Smith's pieces is tonic relief from the show's tendency toward precious ponderousness.

The most effective of her pieces play off cultural stereotypes of gender and myths of American life. *Boy's Life*, for instance, takes the '50s idealized version of "A Boy and a Globe/A Formula for Dreams" and Hollywood's image of true love and juxtaposes them with, among other things, the enlarged image of a postage stamp from Vietnam—the formula for nightmares for so many.

THE PRESS PACKET hype on Todd Murphy identifies him as "a hot young artist" whose works were recently purchased by celebrities like Marcus Allen and Elton John. His multimedia works are enor-

Poetry, where the emerald-gowned figure in the foreground stands on ghostly legs devoid of shins and feet without toes, giving the impression of a doll or bound feet, in noticeable contrast with the sharply defined photos of a breast, nipple erect, and of a woman's hands holding an oversized "cracked" egg collaged atop the dummies in the background. The word the artist chose to use on this piece is "pithicus," a variant on the Greek root for "ape."

Even where the female image is undeniably lovely, as is the seated woman with the long braid falling down her bare back in *Primavera*, the pose suggests submission: head bowed, hands cradled behind her back.

There is no way to know if Murphy is making a comment on Southern women's traditionally assigned roles or, indeed, what message is intended, if any. "So much art is charged with hopelessness, ugliness and sterility," Murphy has said. "I'm interested in making beautiful things." As ever, beauty is in the eye—and subjective experience—of the beholder.

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Transitional Realities runs through April 13 at the Triton Museum of Art, 1505 Warburton Ave., Santa