

# Art in America

JANUARY 1999

## SAN FRANCISCO

### Jeanne C. Finley and John H. Muse at Patricia Sweetow

In "The Adventures of Blacky," collaborators Jeanne Finley and John Muse have used an outdated psychological test as a springboard for a meditation on the violent subtexts that can be part of childhood experience. The exhibition consisted of two distinct parts, the more significant of which was a video installation. In the center of a small, darkened room, a spotlighted wooden chair seemed to sink on unevenly eroded legs into a feathery pile of pencil shavings. Filling one wall was a video projection; on the adjoining wall, slides showed related imagery. Both projections featured appropriated images and text from the aforementioned test, which was developed in the 1950s as a diagnostic tool for evaluating children. The test consists of a sequence of black-and-white cartoons printed on large cards,

portraying a family of dogs: Mama, Papa, Tippy and Blacky.

In the video, a female examiner (seen only as a pair of hands) asks a young girl questions about the pictures in a calm, expressionless voice. Parts of a written guide to the questions—both how to ask them and the possible significance of an answer—appeared in some of the slides, interspersed with the cartoons. As categories such as Oral Compulsiveness or Anal Expulsiveness flash across the screen, the disembodied voice asks questions about images of Blacky going to the bathroom by Mama and Papa's doghouse, or Blacky licking his/her crotch (the dog's gender apparently depends on that of the child being tested). Questions about how Blacky would feel if Tippy's tail were to be cut off were accompanied by a

nightmarish picture of the blindfolded Tippy backed up to a stump. A big knife hangs in midair, little swoops of black ink suggesting imminent movement. Finley and Muse, using their material with a powerful simplicity and a perfect sense of timing, leave plenty of room for the viewer's own memories, emotions and conclusions.

Although the two artists have worked together sporadically for nearly 10 years, this was the first collaborative gallery exhibition that also included sculptural objects. Several of these made up the second and far less compelling part of the show. Sheets of glass artfully etched and sandblasted with images and text, a glass doghouse and a wall of colorful little paper huts seemed like afterthoughts—souvenirs, in the truest sense of the word, functioning as aides mémoires of a moving experience. Without the video installation in the adjoining room, these works would have had little impact or significance.

—Maria Porges



Finley/Muse: Video still from  
*The Adventures of Blacky*, 1998;  
at Patricia Sweetow.