

'Guarded' at Patricia Sweetow Gallery

In the twenty-first century, video art has certainly come of age. Transcending its initial marginalized status as a kind of barely respectable love child of performance art and film, video has evolved to display a fully legitimized, ubiquitous presence. No group exhibition worth its salt is complete without the inclusion of at least one video, preferably presented in installation form. Groundbreaking work by luminaries such as Bruce Nauman and Nam June Paik set the stage for powerful work by contemporary artists that followed them, notably including Bill Viola. Further sophistication of technology has accompanied the arrival of the digital age and we can expect increasing amounts of DVD-style video with optional interactive components on the scene.

In the center of a darkened space at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, accessed by passing through stiff curtains, a tower of dark circular racks rotates, sending video and still images on a spinning journey around the perimeter. Falling on the irregular surfaces of the walls and white-curtained windows, images of life—a sparkler, a wedding, Easter eggs, a birthday cake—are interspersed with black and white images of numbers and words. At times, the alphanumeric component is fairly abstract, but, gradually, the image and the process by which it was created becomes clear: the words are months and the numbers single out a particular day, a particular year. A mechanical device, a date stamper, punches out the numbers with relentless insistence. The thumping sound it makes becomes the backbeat for *Guarded*, a collaboration between Jeanne Finley, chair of the Department of Film and Video at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and John Muse, a Ph.D. candidate in Rhetoric at UC Berkeley.

A child and mother walk along the street, their footsteps echo heavily. Text, taken from a Red Cross pamphlet "Preparing for the Unexpected," streams across the image, urging us to stockpile food, batteries and bottled water. We are told how to store copies of important documents—birth certificates, marriage licenses, powers of attorney.

The date stamper continues its seemingly random act, looming above us, massive and threatening. Eventually, the ink from the accumulation of dates is smeared into abstract expressionistic swirls.

We see a flickering sparkler, overlaid with a strip of brightly colored images—piles of \$100 bills being counted out, an Asian woman singing in a garden, people, fires, a wedding, an abandoned playground carousel and a rearview mirror on a car, speeding away from somewhere. Text continues its march across the image—"They had prepared a disaster supply kit in an easy-to-carry container ..." We hear the sound of the sparkler, hissing; of children's voices, playing; we see feet, walking, viewed from directly above. The overwhelming image of the date stamper returns, on both projections—its randomness and uncertainty accentuate the impossibility of being, in some meaningful way, truly "prepared" for the event of a major disaster. Noticeably absent from the stream of dates is the one etched into everyone's mind: September 11, 2001. The light beaming from the projectors is aimed just at this viewer's eye-level, temporarily blinding as it makes its frequent passes around the room.

The piece becomes nightmarish; its endless, repetitive elements, which induce at first an increasing sense of boredom, gradually break you down to a state of despair. In the footage, a young child, maybe 6 or 7, walks alone, wearing a dark jacket with a hood. We hear the child's footsteps, traffic noises, honking, a siren, then windy, howling sounds. Gradually, we realize the sound of the footsteps has merged with that of the date stamp, both pounding out "thump thump thump ..." Images of driving, of abandoned structures, accompanied by fairly ordinary, but slightly ominous, sounds suggest the panic and fear which have become an undercurrent in our lives: an atmosphere of unease, a state of suspense, and the feeling that our very lives could, like the hissing sparkler,

come abruptly to an end, for no reason, with no apology, no fanfare.

This unsettling piece continues a vein of psychological musings which the pair has explored in their videos and installations for a number of years. Finley, a Fulbright lecturer and Guggenheim fellow, whose work was included in the '93

Jeanne Finley and John Muse, video still of *Guarded*, multi-channel video installation, at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco.



and '95 Whitney Biennials, has collaborated with Muse since 1988. *The Adventures of Blacky* (1998) was an installation inspired by another institutionally produced document, a test designed for psychiatric evaluation of children in an academic setting—its chilling imagery of implied mayhem to cute, cartoon dog/child surrogates seemed more likely to instill neuroses than detect them.

The attraction to suspense lies both in our pleasurable heightened sense of discomfort and in the relief we sense when the suspenseful stimulus is removed: when the threads of the plot are neatly tied up and the lights go on. In *Guarded*, however, the lights remain off; we emerge from the curtains still tense. Yet, by drawing our awareness to the precarious and transitory nature of our being, Finley and Muse also encourage us to experience our lives to the fullest; to savor small, flickering moments of life and appreciate the beauty we see around us.

—Barbara Morris

Jeanne Finley and John Muse: *Guarded* closed in April at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco.

Barbara Morris is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.