

Northern California

Group show at Patricia Sweetow Gallery

Year after year, I'm struck by how most curators and gallerists don't know how to curate a cohesive group show. While one should never underestimate the allure of collector-friendly grab bags designed with a "something for everyone" appeal in mind (holiday exhibitions and auctions being prime exemplars of this genre), on purely aesthetic grounds there ought to be a rhyme and reason for assembling a particular body of work. Ideally, it should aspire to a tight-knit meshing of visual and conceptual threads in which individual works play off of and illuminate dormant aspects of their neighbors. But all too often, curatorial "strategy" seems to drift more in the direction of a *que sera sera*, hope for the best approach. Barring a unifying theme such as sex or millennial angst, the results can easily yield an unwieldy hodgepodge.

The recent untitled and themeless seven-person show (including one collaborative team) at Patricia Sweetow Gallery falls somewhere between seamless success and unredeemed failure. Its motley potpourri of painting, photography, "needle-point drawing" and audio/video embraces everything from operatic magnum opuses to arty wallpaper. If Charles Gute's humorous *Post-Conceptual Decoration: Vertical Panel Motif* continues to lurk unobtrusively in the entry alcove like so much invisible wallpaper (as such, it won't clash with anybody's sofa!), Richard Bassett's twenty-four zebra-striped/strobed minimalist scans and bitmaps of Mt. St. Helen's sounds compelling on paper, but falls flat in person.

Had Sweetow settled on showcasing, say, Maizie Gilbert, David Huffman, and John H. Muse & Jeanne C. Finley, we'd have a fairly strong and cohesive trio. Each artist's work revolves around some notion of physical travel and psychological-cum-spiritual flights of fantasy (if not necessarily fancy). Gilbert traffics in benign drive-by shootings. Armed with a plastic panorama lens camera, she shoots the Bay Bridge and the surrounding landscape visible during her daily commute. In *San Francisco/Oakland Bay Bridge #23* she turns "tunnel vision" into a virtue: Treasure Island tunnel is a pool of black except for the red blips of taillights and a

pocket of proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. *San Francisco/Oakland Bay Bridge #17* achieves a taut fusion of the nature/culture, abstraction/representation dichotomies as dark silhouettes from the bridge's massive beams jut through the surrounding blanket of gray cloud cover like scaffolds in a Franz Kline canvas. By freezing and preserving these fleeting moments, Gilbert's intimate, fortuitous photographs have wrung a stark poetry and understated grandeur from a daily grind that for many has resulted in familiarity breeding myopia.

Huffman's moving pair of untitled paintings exude an altogether funkier air. Although his vignettes are technically acrylic on paper, they almost have the fluidity of gouache or watercolor and, as such, impart a sense of fragility and the ephemeral. The rawness and the ragged imagery of their surfaces, moreover, generates an edginess that bolsters their overall strength and appeal. Bearing the influence of old Japanese cartoons and toy robots, a typical wanderlust scene finds a single, minstrel-like figure with huge painted lips and grinning smile soaring through soupy and slightly corrosive rust-colored skies (or seas) with outstretched arms and metallic, Tin Man legs. As this tragicomic, clown-like character resembles a cross between superhero action figure, automaton, puppet and buf-

foon, the artist pointedly alludes to the dehumanized stature African Americans have endured as the alienated outsider whose real individual identities have been historically submerged beneath a myriad of demeaning stereotypes. Here, we're wont to ask just who is this sadsack figure behind the mask and makeup. Far, far away on the other side of the gallery, an equally potent pendant locates a UFO (a sort of charred lunar module) crowned with a clown head that effectively amplifies this mood of marooned, extraterrestrial isolation. Huffman has an uncanny knack for achieving poignancy and pathos without becoming maudlin.

A few feet away in the small adjacent gallery, Muse & Finley's dizzying audio/video installation *The Trial of Harmony and Invention* resonates authoritatively. Their sensurround *pièce de résistance* ostensibly concerns itself with, among other things, a plane crash and death by drowning (as well as "reinventing the traditional notion of harmony as it dislodges intervals between time and place ..."). The pair overlays twenty-four recordings of Vivaldi's "Winter" concerto and thereby tweaks into existence a new musical score. As majestic strains waft (booms is more like it) throughout the gallery in lush quadrasonic waves, one video monitor projects abstract, poetic symbols of floating dust (as in ashes to ashes ...), a drowning girl, and the cruel, indifferent ocean across the darkened floor and ceiling. A countermovement surfaces in the form of a silver disco ball that fuzzily refracts altimeters and navigational instruments (and causes them to spin, circle and cycle 'round the walls). Even if our life flashes in front of us during those final moments, somehow I don't imagine a spiraling descent to death to be quite this, well, artful. No matter. Art allows us to experience such sublime moments vicariously.

—Harry Roche

