

## **Tom Patterson, "New York Explorers," Winston Salem Journal, March 21, 1999 New York Explorers**

### **New York Explorers**

Photographers deal with issue of identity in one exhibit, nontraditional materials dominate another show at Wake Forest.

Two art students and two faculty artists at Wake Forest University have organized two challenging exhibitions of works borrowed from artists and art galleries in New York.

"Assumed Identity," in the upstairs section of Wake Forest's Fine Art Gallery, brings together works by seven contemporary photographic artists who focus on issues of identity. Seniors Christine Calareso and Curtis Thompson took the initiative to organize this show after they went on a trip to New York to buy works for the Wake Forest art collection.

"Making It Up," in the gallery's lower level, consists of works by four New York artists who use nontraditional materials and improvisational approaches to make art. It was curated by David Finn, a sculptor and an assistant professor of art at Wake Forest, and Victor Faccinto, an artist and the director of the university's Fine Art Gallery.

All the artists in "Assumed Identity" use photographic imagery to critique or otherwise challenge widespread cultural assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, age or individuality. It's a loose curatorial premise that could have generated a larger exhibit, but it works reasonably well in this small show.

In their black-and-white photos, Amy Jenkins and Bill Jacobson focus on the male body to explore themes related to sex and death respectively. Jacobson's blurry photos of thin, pallid, shaven-headed nude men form an open-ended commentary on illness, mortality and memory in the age of AIDS.

By placing miniature objects associated with childhood play on various parts of a man's body and photographing them in close-ups, Jenkins evokes emotions associated with budding sexuality and the transition from innocence to experience. Sally Mann highlights related issues by photographing her own children in poses and circumstances that suggest sexual precociousness, wisdom beyond their years and – in Black Eye – death.

In Cindy Sherman's close-up facial self-portrait, she assumes an alternate identity by wearing an artificial-looking smile, heavy make-up, a blonde wig and dozens of black plastic ants that seem to be crawling all over her head. By layering two nearly identical transparencies on the front of a wall-mounted lightbox, she has heightened the unsettling effect of this larger-than-life image.

Racial identity and the dehumanizing impact of racism are the themes tackled by Carrie Mae Weems and Andres Serrano in their photographs here. Weems' diptych, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, juxtaposes red-tinted photos of an elderly black man and woman with texts that comment on racial stereotypes and the indignities suffered by earlier generations of black Americans.

### **'Making It Up'**

The eyes of the Ku Klux Klansman wearing a green hood in Serrano's close-up portrait are obscured in dark shadows behind their raggedly sewn eye-holes. Serrano thus implies that this anonymous person has dehumanized himself as much as he has the people he hates because of their cultural identity.

There's an effective thematic resonance between Serrano's photograph and Barbara Kruger's large, red-tinted close-up photo of an angry-looking man's face. Superimposed texts proclaim, "Hate like us," and locate the roots of hatred and cruelty in personal humiliation. Although it dates from 1994, this piece seems timely in view of recent hate crimes reported in the national news.

Instead of exploring sociopolitical themes – an increasingly common curatorial strategy – "Making It Up" emphasizes materials and processes. The four artists represented here make art out of ordinary materials and take improvisational or otherwise experimental approaches that, in most cases, exploit elements of chance and haphazardness.

Susanna Starr uses paint to create abstract compositions. But instead of painting on canvas or even boards, she pours paint directly onto industrial sponges so that it pools and swirls on and around these thick, sculptural surfaces, which she displays on the floor. Though one might read these works as metaphors for excess, they seem to be explorations of material interrelationships, and they're of interest primarily as embodiments of a striking tension between beauty and awkwardness.

Ava Gerber used artificial flowers, wire, yarn, lace and other ornamental fabrics to create her deliberately flimsy sculptural pieces here.

Although delicate, Gerber's pieces have a brashly offhand quality that's analogous to punk-rock music. Their circular and cylindrical forms suggest varied themes, including captivity and the cyclical processes of nature. And their engagement with feminist concerns is subtly emphasized in the obscure title of one hoop-shaped piece, Taffeefanga, a Dogon word that can be roughly translated as "skirt power."

### **Futuristic Suggestions**

**Drew Shiflett uses papier-mache, electrical conduits and scraps of cardboard, styrofoam and metal tileboard to construct the most labor-intensive works in this exhibit. They suggest scale models of vast, futuristic ritual structures that might contain temples and dwellings for thousands of priests and monks.**

Finally, Jeffrey Gurecka plays absurd and sometimes creepy games with the still-life tradition in sculptures made from rotting fruit, Bondo (an auto-body repair putty) and other unconventional materials. In one piece he has cast a bunch of bananas in Bondo and joined them together to form a single elongated gray banana. In another, he cast nine decayed and sagging jack-o'-lanterns in Bondo and placed them on the floor like so many human skulls in an exaggerated vanitas still-life. For his most disturbing piece here, Gurecka tore small holes into the skins of decayed oranges, inserted photographs of human eyes, and displayed the oranges in a wooden crate so that they appear to return the viewer's gaze.

Both of these shows are on view through next Sunday. Although vastly different in thematic emphases, both shows are made up of works that are highly intriguing, and both point the important role that curators play in selecting and combining works to create an effective art exhibition.

### **Tom Patterson**