

Liss Platt/Processing

Transcript of Review
From SD Gay + Lesbian
TimesOf Primates, Holy Ground and Female Hysterics:
3 In One at Southwestern College

The three installations currently on view at Southwestern College Art Gallery are comprised of a bizarre mix of installations that deal with everything from Neo-primitivism and Holy places to the Female hysteric. If the gallery at Southwestern were a small space, the overall effect of such disparate work would be somewhat like a drug-induced hallucinatory nightmare. Fortunately, the art gallery is large and roomy, allowing the viewer to re-orient him/herself before proceeding on to the next installation. In the case of this particular show, this is doubly fortunate, as the only interesting installation, the work of the "barely butch-dyke" artist Liss Platt, is located in the right-hand partition of the gallery and therefore viewed last.

Platt's humorous and sometimes scatological deconstruction of surrealist photography and the female hysteric is a welcome antidote to the essentialist and somewhat goofy pretentiousness of the other two installations. Both Joyce Cutler-Shaw and Ellen Phillips, in their respective installations "The Anatomy Lesson" and "Bridging #8", have attempted to capture the Sublime, the feeling of awe, terror and spirituality that has fascinated intellectuals and artists since the latter part of the eighteenth century. The Sublime certainly has a venerable tradition in art; artists who have attempted to harness it range from the American landscape painter Thomas Cole to the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman and the earth artists such as Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt. Unfortunately, the Sublime can often degenerate into the supercilious, sentimental and superficial, which unfortunately is the case with these two installations. A good indication of the relative pretentiousness of an art work is the amount of poetry in lower case letters included as part of the work. Cutler-Shaw's installation contains not one but four scrolls of poetry, two in Chinese. Almost as though forced to conceptually unite two semesters worth of anatomical drawings (Cutler-Shaw draws beautifully), Cutler-Shaw has hit upon the simplistic notion that in spite of cultural, racial and gender differences, all humankind

is more alike than different, since we all have bones.

"Bridging #8", by Ellen Phillips, is an outside-in earth installation which is meant to inspire meditation. Phillips, in order to insure that no profound thoughts fade into obscurity, has thoughtfully provided plastic strips and markers for the viewer to jot down his or her impressions. Those impressions then become part of the installation when the viewer hangs them in one of the four corners. In spite of its studiously darkened setting and carefully flung debris, Phillips' installation is more tired than anything else. This sort of thing has been done before, many many times. Phillips' "Bridging #8" is less a natural temple than a jaded art world bid for attention. Even the comments of past viewers, written out on plastic strips, seemed tired, all containing the same message of regurgitated New Age spiritualism.

The final installation, "Silent Treatment and Talking Cures", by Liss Platt is as unassuming as the previous two were pretentious. Nothing is sacred to Platt, who uses the serious and high art photographic vocabulary of surrealist photography to poke fun at the notion of the female hysteric. Like the work in her recent M.F.A. show "Looking Long and Hard", Platt's photographs are big and luscious, beautifully printed and very sensuous. In keeping with the traditional subject matter of surrealist photography, Platt photographs women in mysterious poses doing strange things, as in the case of the woman gazing at the beef tongue, or another woman putting on a little too much lipstick. The female hysteric, a creature defined in the nineteenth century by Charcot and his student Freud, was a middle class adolescent girl subject to fits as the result of an unruly uterus. The "silent treatment" referred to in Platt's title was the stimulation of the uterus (Charcot would actually exhibit his patients", while the "talking cures" refers to the psychoanalysis at the hands of men that women had to undergo. The idea of the female hysteric, controlled by the demands of her uterus, is still very much present today. One need only glance through the pages of a woman's magazine in order to realize how common the assumption is that a woman is largely governed by the demands of her reproductive system.

Platt's choice to use Surrealist stylistic vocabulary to deconstruct the idea of the female hysteric is particularly appropriate given the Surrealist fascination with Freud and his teachings on female sexuality. Traditionally and typically misogynistic, the Surrealist artists actually went so far as to sponsor a panel on female sexuality, a panel comprised of male speakers and attended by males. In Surrealist art, the woman has two roles: that of the temptress, and that of the muse. In Platt's photographs, these roles are deconstructed. In one photograph, the "temptress", no longer interested in men, sticks her tongue into another woman's ear, while in another photograph the muse has a mouth distastefully full of pins. In the center of the installation, a video of an "hysteric" laughing plays continually, a reminder that psychoanalysis, in spite of its confessional style cure, did not really permit women to communicate articulately.

Three-in-One is on view at Southwestern College Art Gallery through November 6, 1992. Gallery Hours are T-F 10-2, and W-Th 6-9 p.m.