

in SEARCH

of



the PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

"There is another world, but it is in this one." Paul Eluard (1895-1952)

I aim "to justify the despised reality," asserted the nineteenth century philosopher Hegel.¹ In essence, he opposed that privileging of a mechanistic rationality, divorced from intuition, feeling or spirituality, which has been the dominant direction of Western thought since the Middle Ages. This value system, insisted upon by science in order to justify its ever-increasing powers over the organic world (and those who have a spiritual rather than a utilitarian attitude towards it), is based on the assumption that the intuitive and the revelatory represent "lower kinds of knowledge" which can never measure up to the clear demonstrability of material fact. In contrast, Hegel maintained that the separation of "objective" from "subjective" knowledge is a distortion of reality and that science errs in having such "unbending notions of the true and the false."² He saw reality as holistic -- as an on-going, progressive synthesis, continually absorbing and surpassing all contradiction, and thus far more complex than any static dichotomy would allow.

Almost two hundred years later, at least one aspect of this argument still rages. Hegel's heirs still try to break down the dualistic value constructions upon which Western culture is based. As the Deconstructionists have so recently insisted, these binarisms assume an arbitrary privileging system in which, for instance, Good is preferred over Evil or Light over Darkness or Nature over Culture. Unfortunately, they also include more oppressive kinds of assumptions --ie., that Man is superior to Woman or that white European culture is more "valid" than other cultures or that heterosexuality is the norm and homosexuality an aberration. In fact, the idea that there are ahistorical and absolute "standards" which uphold the dominant or "traditional" values assigned to these paired phenomena is the subject of on-going political/cultural debate.

As always, within this ideological battlefield, conceptual purity is the first casualty. Those who believe in an objective value system must necessarily maintain that there is some absolute Platonic reality existing outside of time and space for the purpose of justifying their beliefs. Naturally, they overlook the mysticism upon which this "common-sense" viewpoint is based. On the other hand, those who wish to do away entirely with the notion of value oppositions are also inconsistent. Since this concept is deeply embedded in our thought and language, accomplishing their desire requires that they remove themselves from their own culture and act from a position of "objective observer," a feat which they themselves claim impossible. Thus, while they counter the ahistorical position by insisting that time and culture influence belief, they don't actually create any radical new way of thought or take us out of Western duality. In fact, without Hegel's faith in a progressive synthesis, they end up merely promoting that which was formerly deprecated. The Other now takes precedence but an opposition is maintained.

This difficulty manifests itself in the contemporary discussion of aesthetic pleasure. Once Truth, Goodness and Beauty were the Platonic ideals, the essential elements of the Divine. Yet, in this century, these ancient values have appeared to many to represent either an irretrievable world of Faith or the bad old order of Absolutism. Nevertheless, belief in them has not been eradicated but merely inverted. We no longer believe in Truth but we do in the power of illusion. The quaint notion of Goodness has been replaced by its opposite, moral relativism, and the idealization of Beauty by the "anti-aesthetic." Ironically, the new valuation given this puritanical form of art continues to maintain the elitism it overtly denounces. While its proponents attack the older Modernist view in which "high culture" was valued over "kitsch" ("lower class" or popular culture), the new version establishes a high culture in which aesthetic asceticism becomes the sign of the dichotomy between the "artist-prophet" and "the masses." What Steven Connor calls the "moralism of political commitment," makes a virtue of sensuous abstinence in art.³ Thus an intellectualized, rhetorical form of image-making is the accepted form of protest against the capitalist culture industry and its false promise of unsublimated pleasures. In this framework, any impulse toward aesthetic pleasure is seen as an oppositional political stance supporting a manipulative, oppressive, neoconservative agenda.

Of course, there are those who insist they are trying to break down distinctions between the pleasures of the general populace and those of an "elite." Yet it seems that they never manage to do so. In fact, it is hard to imagine that they really intend such a thing. Many contemporary artists have merely inherited the mantle of Warhol, sneering at the "common" values of the commodity-driven marketplace while reaping its financial benefits. Nor do cultural "critics" watch Oprah, read comic books or study the Internet for the undifferentiated aesthetic pleasure this may afford them, but in order to make an intellectualized commentary on the "significance" of such phenomena to an educated audience. The distinction between material culture and its use as self-interested intellectual fodder is no less apparent now than it was in Hegel's day. The difference is that Hegel believed that the material and the spiritual could be synthesized into some form of organic wholeness and his protest, as with all the Idealists, took that as its goal. Contemporary protests on either side of the political fence merely uphold the mechanistic rationality which so offended the nineteenth century mind, while continuing to offer us nothing more than re-runs of two-hundred year old arguments, depleted, for modern sensibilities, of any transcendental qualities.

It was for these reasons that Robert Hirsch and I decided to curate this exhibition. We wanted to see how contemporary artists would respond to the idea of "aesthetic pleasure," along with other issues which we saw as interconnected -- the emotional, the intuitive, the sensual or the spiritual. We feel passionately that artists need to rearticulate these issues and reintegrate them with the intellectual or political concerns that have dominated contemporary art discourse in recent years. As a result, we have assembled a rather idiosyncratic exhibition -- in which the artists interpret the theme according to their own wishes, addressing what Roland Barthes has called *jouissance* or "the consent of life in the body."⁴ Interpretations range from direct physical or visual pleasure to humor to cultural ritual/memory to more complicated responses involving a recognition of the intermingling of pleasure and its darker side -- irrationality, fetishism, obsession, memory, pain and loss, aging, illness and death. Each artist has written a statement detailing his or her struggle to make art which tries, once again, "to justify the despised reality."

- 1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, quoted in Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 260.
- 2 Hegel, quoted in J.N. Findley, *Hegel: A Reexamination*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1970, 37.
- 3 Steven Connor, "Aesthetics, Pleasure and Value," in Stephen Regan, ed., *The Politics of Pleasure: Aesthetics and Cultural Theory*, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992, p. 216.
- 4 *Ibid.*

Kathleen Campbell
Assistant Professor of Art
State University of New York
Buffalo, NY

In Search of the Pleasure Principle

Most photo-based imagemakers I know do not spend much of their time discussing Hegel, Descartes, or Derrida. What they do discuss is which work is shown in the major venues and which gets ignored. During the past fifteen years, photography's critical dialogue has been dominated by European academic theoreticians whose philosophies appear to assert a greater value for the role of the interpreter than that of the maker. Intolerant of non-political interpretations and any non-material focus, the Deconstructionists disallow any direct experience of aesthetic pleasure. Their theories are a continuation of the dualistic mechanical philosophy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which people are viewed as isolated (alienated) observers and not as active participants in the cosmos. Their coolly academic approach also brings a foreign sensibility and class consciousness that deconstructs American mythology, but replaces it with a void; leaving us without a sense of community or hope.

In Search of the Pleasure Principle focuses on imagemakers who concentrate on a visceral rather than a theoretical approach to their work. These artists critically engage their bodies as well as their minds, celebrating the intimate connections between humans and nature. They struggle for an organic wholeness that blends the emotional, intuitive, sensual, spiritual and intellectual.

Recent shifts to the radical right in American culture and politics make it vital for artists not to throw-up their hands and say they have no answers, for to do so is to cede the issues of humanity and spirituality to the political conservatives. Under such circumstances, it is imperative for artists to offer counter-measures which deploy our fundamental American strengths and engage the belief in the power of nature as an effective weapon against blaming, stereotyping, and pretentious standards. This exhibition includes thirteen artists from across the country whose cognitive and holistic investigations stress a full participatory relationship with their subject as a way of knowing. Their work represents the great metaphysical struggle of our culture: reconciling what we know in our heads with what we know in our hearts.

Robert Hirsch
Executive Director & Chief Curator
CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, NY



*Untitled, 1993, 17x14, Copper, pastel,
polyurethane on roentgenograph*

Cora Cohen

...I consider these re-treated x-rays. They are particular images of particular people. They land directly on the wall, a little apart from the wall, and produce shadow. All of these people are now dead, All were young men. All died of AIDS.

Usually x-rays are sold back to the companies which manufacture them because the silver in them is reused. In this instance, they weren't because the physician who had treated these men saved the films out of his attachments to the people.

I've experienced, as most of us in the art community, and perhaps, more recently, the world at large, tremendous loss due to AIDS. When the x-rays came to my studio I put them up all over the windows and thought about everyone I'd known and their bodies and their psyches during the disease - and how I had felt, as well. I've never known someone who died comfortably of AIDS. After months I began to respond to this on the x-rays themselves with chemicals and color. They are a metaphor for the physical actuality of the body in its immaterial aspect. And a representation (decontextualized, of course...) of that body.



Bev, 1994, 14 x 9, Electrostatic print

Joan Curtis

The women in my... series yearn for the niceties of life, in the setting up of their households, the presentation of themselves to others, their desires and dreams. They take pride in their homes, gardens, and domestic achievements. Amazing are the efforts they take to keep ordinary civilized life on an elevated plane and to keep the wilderness at bay. Who among us has never desired material accoutrements to soften our lives. As my mother used to say, "I like my creature comforts."



Family Album #5, 1990, 20 x 30, Chromogenic color print

James Baker Hall

In these straight photographs using images from my family album, I release the shutter only when what I see on the ground glass looks familiar, though I have only a few sketchy recollections from that traumatic time of my life. I appear to be working within the lineage of cave painting, unearthing images from the buried walls of my mind, remembering without the aid of memory.



Divers Dives V, 1993, 16 x 20, Gelatin silver print

Ann A. Johnson

....Skin diving is different from snorkeling in that you swim under the water. At different depths you can look down on one world and up at another.... As you step into the cool water and feel the rough unfamiliar sand and rocks on your feet while stumbling around for footing and balance, a rational voice tells you, "This is unfamiliar territory. You are a land animal, go back." Your rational mind might consider turning back if you are only in the water to your ankles, but if your knees are submerged a foreign voice in the form of a salty scent and a...lapping of waves beckons, "You are safe here. You have been here before. Swim in my waters and cool your sun-red flesh. You are as safe as you were in your mother's arms."

Here you are introduced to the world of the coral, the sting ray, neon fish, subtle creatures and soft, muted light. Once surrounded by this new world, the pleasures you feel remind you that this is not an unfamiliar world, but one you enjoyed for a while earlier in your life. Hearing your body expel its air (so that you can submerge) helps you remember. Feeling the warm, soft, salty liquid surround and protect your naked flesh helps you remember. Seeing the graceful and primitive images with the help of the filtered, quiet light helps you remember.



The Tenth Muse from the Nine Daughters Series
1992/93, 7 x 8 3/4, Toned gelatin silver print

Wayne R. Lazorik

I

Georges Bataille writes,
"We are admitted to the knowledge of a pleasure
in which the notion of pleasure
is mingled with mystery,
suggestive of the taboo that fashions the pleasure
at the same time as it condemns it."

"And it is vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving
wherein men find pleasure to be deceived."

John Locke

II

The pleasure of imagination:
"Going ridiculous voyages,
Making quaint progress,
Turning as with serious purpose
Before stupid winds."

Stephen Crane

To paraphrase Pablo Picasso:
"I put all that I enjoy in my pictures.
The pictures will just have to put up with it."



Untitled, 1993, 41 x 50, Toned, waxed gelatin silver print

Frank Noelker

My current work deals with the strange and awkward beauty of domesticated animals. I am interested in recreating for the viewer that peculiar shock I felt on first encountering these visceral beasts. I am drawn to their unself-conscious sensuality and overt sexuality, yet there also exists for me a sadness because they are broken. When I photograph an animal we do a slow dance, moving around each other in varying degrees of mistrust. The photographs are large, toned and coated with beeswax to further emphasize the physicality of the animals and the objectness of the image.



Untitled, 93/10/4, 1993, 30 x 48
Chromogenic color print

Michael O'Brien

My work is an ongoing study of the ocean's constantly changing mood, size, color, temperature, texture, and how it coexists with the sky. My...photos...offer the viewer a window into an experience most people can relate to...be it physical, sensual, perceptual, or metaphysical.



*Muncan Valley, Bali, 1994, 10 x 10,
Chromogenic color print*

John Pfahl

Just after the rainy season, the island of Bali is cloaked by an amazing green and becomes a shimmering world where the nuances of just one color make up a whole spectrum. Terraced rice fields spread over the slopes of ancient volcanoes and step their way up the steepest hillsides. They compose a landscape that is almost totally man-made, but whose undulant designs seem as natural as waves of water or sand. Rice and its cultivation has been the basic element of Balinese culture and civilization since a least the 11th century. Altars to the rice goddess Bhatari Sri, laden with offerings, dot the fields. The optical pleasure a visitor feels in surveying these iridescent patterns is quickened by the buzz of dragonflies and timelessness. Green revives the world once again and suffuses the atmosphere. The mind reels and, to borrow from the great English poet Marvell, annihilates all else to green thought in a green shade.



Denuded, #1, 1994, 16 x 20
Chromogenic color print

Felicity Rich

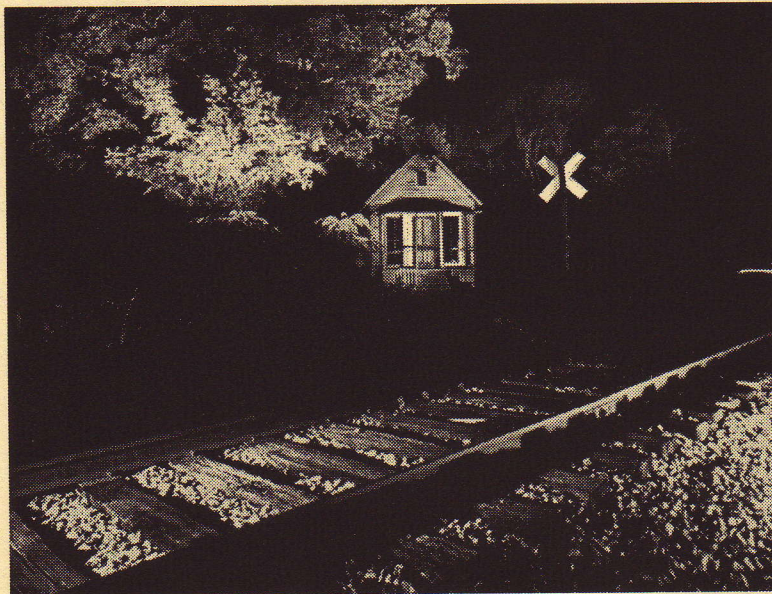
As an artist working in an institution and society laden with written and visual information, I am inundated with imagery that attempts to “mean” something. Seeking an alternative to all of this “information imagery,” I turned to gardening. The act of planting, nurturing, picking, arranging, and scanning flowers was meditative, in contrast to the disciplined work of my day job. Gardening is therapeutic, a return to earthly pleasures and sensual creativity. I began exploring flower arrangements that (refer to) human relationships and experiences. The reductive imagery which has evolved is intuitive and playful. Floral forms take on human characteristics, echoing aspects of life such as sexuality, love, conflict, and decline. The work, like the garden, is about life cycles; the process of generation and growth and its inherent contradictions. In these images I look for the visual delight found in formal arrangements and attempt to elicit emotions and paradoxes that nature can inspire.



Anne Braxton as Babe Ruth, 1992
20 x 16, Toned gelatin silver print

Elise Mitchell Sanford

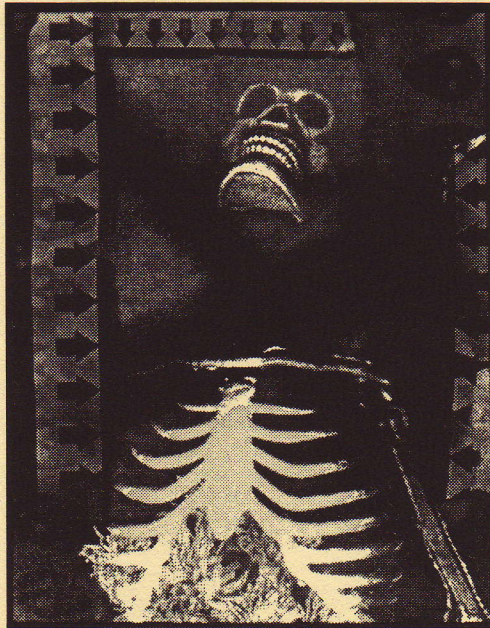
Age is still one of the final taboos in our culture — only death seems... more unapproachable in its awe-some-ness. As a result, those who age — becoming progressively invisible as the years accumulate — become partners in death/age denial. In my fantasy female series, *The Stuff of Dreams*, older women return to earlier role models as mature adults — to “try on” the personality of a self-chosen famous personality and to bring the model’s life experience to the role play. The result is an often humorous, tongue-in-cheek portrait that spoofs traditional age imagery and turns expectations on their heads. The new image may be humorous, nostalgic, bittersweet or tender, but always honest.



Views from the Tracks / Store, 1992, 16 x 20, Cibachrome

Thomas Tulis

My aim is to make a work of art that is visually pleasurable.... An image which gives pleasure to the senses...is more likely to get the attention of the unlearned in the arts while the learned...tend to view art that is "beautiful" as superficial and passe. What's more, the definition of beauty is now suspect and corrupted. If we push all that aside, I would be satisfied to get a huzzah from a farmer...and consider all the rest casuistry.



Oracion: Valentine's Day / Day of the Dead, 1990/91
24 x 20, Hand colored gelatin silver print

Kathy Vargas

....A lot of my work has been about some sort of...death. I don't think of this as morbid, but simply as a part of the cycle of life; dying is the complement of living, and vice versa. Being aware of death makes life more intense. That's the way I learned to see it from within my Mexican American culture, from the time I was a child. I work with a lot with complements. It is important to me to formally depict the starkness of death within the complement of beauty. So I make hand colored images to get you to look into something you might not want to see. It works. People come to look at the soft colors and find out that there's a death waiting inside; or they come to look at the harshness of death and find life waiting for them in the seduction of the colors.



Spheres of Influence, 1992, 20 x 24, Chromogenic color print

Jo Whaley

The series, *Natura Morta*, translates...as “still life,” but...the literal meaning is “dead nature.” Under the guise of the traditional still-life, I use the rich colors and sensual shapes of fruits, vegetables and flowers to allude to the richness and bounty of the natural environment. But here the affinity with the historical still life ends. Each image contains suggestions that something is amiss in the relationship between humanity and nature in the 20th century. An opulent basket of fruit is half-eaten and slightly rotten. Rubber bugs crawl and cardboard bees pollinate. The artificial co-exists uneasily with the natural, much as it does in our modern, urban world. Intentionally sensuous, with a touch of whimsy, these photographs are all straight, color prints, poised somewhere between the imaginary and the real.

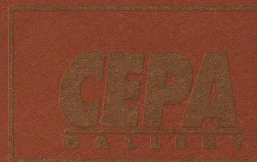
In presenting the unabashedly beautiful, I am consciously reintroducing visual delight into art. My method is that age-old artistic process of direct observation, rather than the post-modern restructuring of indirect experiences. Beauty in art has been held with disdain for quite sometime now. But in our urban centers, there is plenty of ugliness around to admire. It might be time for an antidote rather than a reflection.

in search of the pleasure principle

curated by Robert Hirsch and Kathleen Campbell

april 8-june 14, 1995

CORA COHEN
JOAN CURTIS
JAMES BAKER HALL
ANN A. JOHNSON
WAYNE R. LAZORIK
FRANK NOELKER
MICHAEL O'BRIEN
JOHN PFAHL
FELICITY RICH
ELISE MITCHELL SANFORD
THOMAS TULIS
KATHY VARGAS
JO WHALEY



700 MAIN STREET
4TH FLOOR
BUFFALO
NEW YORK 14202
716.856.2717

*Catalogue design by Sean Donaher
and layout support by Anjanette Brush & Sue O'Donnell*

CEPA PUBLICATIONS ARE FUNDED IN PART BY THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS (A FEDERAL AGENCY), NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS, ERIE COUNTY, CITY OF BUFFALO, CAMPOS PHOTOGRAPHY CENTER AND CEPA MEMBERS