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reviews

CHICAGO:

YOUTH CULTURE KILLED MY DOG (BUT I DON'T REALLY MIND)

TBA EXHIBITION SPACE

230 W. Huron St., 60610
312/587-3300

Image isn't everything; context is. But in an environment of instant commodification, sussing out the indicators of any prevailing style or strategy in contemporary art is risky business. Categorization stirs the shibboleth of inclusion/exclusion. Scanning the scene and drawing generalities from particulars isn't easy. Everyone's a critic, but as surveys so often prove, not everyone's a curator. How refreshing then, to see a show so conceptually sure, one that avoids the strained didacticism that frequently mars any attempt to illumine the moment.

Curated by Kathryn Hixson, Joe Scanlan, and Irene Tsatsos, "Youth Culture Killed My Dog (but I don't really mind)" was the first annual exhibition of the

John Darmour
Dollface, 1994, from "Youth Culture Killed My Dog (but I don't really mind)." Black-and-white photograph, 8" x 5". Photo by Susan Anderson.

newly formed Contemporary Arts Council, a kind of latter-day Chautauqua open to anyone interested in the current scene. Envisioned as an examination of how contemporary work can function independently of established trends (in art-making and the market) without embracing an utterly oppositional stance, the show, featuring work by 13 individuals, suggested that artists and viewers speak the same language and that this shared knowledge of myriad cultural signs expands rather than constricts the possibility of meaningful communication.

While the works on view served this conceit persuasively, their orneriness afforded them an essential element of autonomy that resists thematic subsumption. Mundane, banal, disinterested, transgressive, they revealed that representation and narrative, gender and sexuality (and all the spin-offs of power) sometimes play a greater role than the high concepts, abstraction, or self-referentiality.

One might dismiss Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg's *Beans* (faux, hand-sculpted kidney beans in an inverted Potash Bros. supermarket bag), but not Lisa Yuskavage's uncompromisingly kitschy canvases of alluring child-women caught in a haze of Life-Saver colors, like wannabe Balthus girls on black velvet. Keith Cottingham's *Fictitious Portraits*—stunning computer mockups of a melancholic young male—revive the challenge of Apollonian delight that tortured Mann's Aschenbach. Richard Hawkins's wonderfully crappy "homage" to long-tressed rock guitarist Zakk Wylde (a sheet of blue felt stuck with a few roughly snipped fanzine photos and hand-written notes crying, "not ever again," "never, never again"), intimates the muteness of undifferentiated desire.

In John Darmour's black-and-white photo, *Dollface*, a femininely coifed sex toy with a blow-job mouth sports a sailor suit and mustache. Role-playing in her own photos and video, Helen Mirra also takes on the manly myths of the sea. In one picture, she stands in an alley, arms crossed, a duffel bag off to the side and out-of-focus. Another — distilling the import of Paul Cadmus's *The Fleets In!*—effortlessly connotes peripatetic sexuality with a close-up of a sailor's many-buttoned crotch.

Pressed into service as models of informed impartiality, these pieces confirm Tsastos's assertion, made in her catalogue essay, that "appealing to anything isn't necessarily the point of the work . . . It's not working for validation. It's working for itself."

~Thomas Connors

JUNIPER TEDHAMS

RANDOLPH STREET GALLERY

756 N. Milwaukee Ave., 60622
312/666-7737

Cue music: Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Cue montage: Juniper riding her $25 yard-sale bike through a bohemian urban vista; Juniper washing out brushes scavenged from art-school painting studios at semester's end; Juniper giving tips from behind her beater's hood on how to cook an egg in a tuna-fish can on the car's engine; Juniper tending her fire-escape garden; Juniper laughing with friends over an ice-cold Budweiser. Juniper, living.

"Good Things," an installation by Juniper Tedhams, marked the premiere solo exhibition of work by the first visual-art graduate of Scuola Martha Stewart, the forty-something Connecticut matron cum cateress, best-selling author, syndicated television star, magazine editor, homekeeping guru, and now multimillionairess due to an unequaled rise to fame and fortune through the dissemination of domestic tips to the white American bourgeoisie. Stewart's status as a national curiosity is nothing new. Her upper-middle-class, New-English take on life has been gracing book- and video-store shelves for nearly 20 years; her merchandising deal with K-Mart in the late '80s marked her engagement with an even broader consumer base, and certified Stewart herself as an up-and-coming player in the world of high finance; and her status as fodder for features editors nationwide has continued to grow steadily, culminating with last year's parody publication of Stewart's own *Martha Stewart Living* called *Is Martha Stewart Living?*

"Good Things" entailed Tedhams's appropriation of Stewart's project in the form of re-presenting the results of over 20 of Stewart's tips for lifestyle betterment. These painstakingly crafted "ready-mades," offered up as art in the white cube, rested helplessly on their pristinely painted white shelves, robbed of both their context and function. A quick walk around the gallery's perimeter sparked coos of delight from those as yet uninitiated into Stewart's world, and boredom from those who have already learned that if one attempts Martha's recipe for the perfect fortune cookie, and follows that recipe to the letter, one will, in fact, be rewarded with a plateful of treats that will spoil you (and your guests) for the more common, mass-produced variety. Viewer response, however, seemed limited solely to Stewart's project; the artist's take on these objects was strangely absent from the offering.

Juniper Tedhams
Installation detail of "Good Things," 1995. Mixed media.
Photo courtesy of Randolph Street Gallery.

Tedhams's artist statement maintains that "an ambiguous tension exists between my agenda and the comfortable seduction of Martha's world," and while this may be true, there is nothing in "Good Things" that reveals the