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BRAVE AND TROUBLED VOICES

Los Angeles / Judith Spiegel

A provocative and courageous show entitled Against Nature, after J. K. Huysman's nineteenth century meditation on exquisitely decadent sensual practices, is currently on view at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). An extensive exhibition of art by gay men about homosexuality, curated by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins, its intent is to examine a particular aesthetic: "the ways in which sexual desire informs, distances and empowers the recent history of art made by guys like us." We are invited to enter this environment where, within the self-contested limitations of the terrain, a variety of voices, beauties and terrors can be found. The sadistic hoobobits with the pathetic, and the belied is Janus-faced—half woman contributed to my unease. Let's face it—all publicity presented that speaks to an issue of sexuality would be unsettling in our culture, and the idea of sexual freedom—in connection with the fear of AIDS—takes on the quality of a parable lost.

The more conservative elements of heterosexual society have always found the serial, prudery and nonproductive aspects of homosexuality distasteful, it not immoral. At best, a gay man was not too offensive if obviously effeminate and languishingly that most despicable of creatures—a woman—in the form of a queen. What really upset godfearing Republicans were mocha men in leather. The gay man as sexual outlaw is a time-honored stance (not always butch), one that writers such as William Burroughs and, lately, Dennis Cooper, like to cultivate. This is the mystique of the Bad Guy forever in search of the next boy body-beautiful. In his catalog-essay short story, Cooper writes about a sexual obsession with the inviolate, if hard-to-get Pierre (reality) and the boy prostitute Kenny who dies from AIDS (fantasy). At one time Cooper could enjoy erotic fantasies about sex and impeding death; AIDS has ruined that for him. Consumption is likely to remain imaginary—and thus, perfect.

The videotape This Is Not An AIDS Advertisement, by Isaac Julien, attempts to reclaim freedom of sexual expression, rendered almost impossible by enormous guilt put upon the gay community. "Feel no guilt in your desire," is intoned and flashed between images of two almost seraphically beautiful young men shot against the background of Venice. The lynx of the water imagery and repeated sequences of the two men offering flowers to the camera (audience) do little to obviate the funeral undertones.

Tom Klas's video They Are Lost to Vision Altogether is intended to be a personal response to the federal government's refusal to fund the dissemination of explicit with the humanity of Kuchar's everyday life. As does Stashe Kybartas's Danny, The Thursday People takes the dying and death of a person with AIDS as its focal point (Kuchar never mentions the disease by name). Its dianetic form interweaves the death of filmmaker Curt McDowell with Kuchar's ongoing life, including scenes of a dinner party, a film festival, a Greek festival and the filming of a rather ridiculous sequence at the King Kong where a Bigfoot (a man in a reality tacky costume) abducts and murders a woman in a white dress. Kuchar's most frequently used technique is to point the camera at a person and chat; the camera never seems to threaten anyone, and if Kuchar is often slyly reverent toward his friends and colleagues, he is never condescending. McDowell is filmed in his last days, shrunken, bedridden, surrounded by friends and family. Kuchar shows us photographs of McDowell with friends (including a younger Kuchar from the "good old days" of the seventies). Alone at home, Kuchar repeats the memorial address on McDowell he gave at the film festival: the early images of him as a robust and sensuous man contrast starkly with his later deterioration. Kuchar's monology in the presence of his cat reveals his regrets and his deep sense of loss regarding times past and passing. Surrounding the set piece of the funeral is a celebration—even though Kuchar has been a constant witness, watching McDowell die. The component of the exhibition is more diffuse but equally intriguing. Some of the works, however, like Johnny Puch's faces-colored floor sculpture Abstract Asia, are little more than visual one-liners. The punk-out structures of John de Fazio have the hallucinogenic power of a debauched R. Crumb. These constructions

are elaborate visual puns done in best East Village cartoon style. De Fazio's work is intriguing and repulsive, with the knowing stance of the intentionally indecipherable.

Overall, the most realized works deal with the image of the gay male in relation to self-created mythologies and ideas of the erotic. Kevin Wolff's paintings are perhaps the most conventional pieces in the show, but his Man on a Stick is a po-

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Although it is increasingly difficult to remember the seventies with any perspective, it seems to have been a decade when everyone was at least potentially gay or lesbian. Did we really do all those drugs, sleep with legions of people from all class backgrounds, races, sexes—and live to tell the tale? These behaviors described as archetypical of the gay man (promiscuously, engaging in exotic, usually anonymous sexual experimentation) were certainly common practices of the urban, heterosexual society of the time, espoused by the same people who became the moralizing, child-saving, money-grubbing Yuppies of the eighties. Gay men made oral and anal sex (not to mention SM) all right for straight people—to acceptable that Dr. Ruth could talk about them on television. AIDS changed all that. Even had AIDS never come about, there probably would have been a backlash against homosexuals, as there has been against women, blacks, lesbians, Jews (perhaps it would have manifested itself as an even more virulent witch-hunt for perceived pedophiles). The Reagan Revolution alone would have insured some form of sexual repression, to complement the not-so-far-away permission given to racists and sexists. The genuinely frightening advent of AIDS is frightening homosexuals.

Given the current political and social climate, Against Nature seems more daring—and misleading—than it would have eight or ten years ago. I was surprised at my own discomfort the first time I walked through the exhibition rooms. Although there was no one piece I found unnervingly graphic, the pervasive display of an esthetic of desire that excluded my concerns as a woman contributed to my unease. Let's face it—all publicity presented that speaks to an issue of sexuality would be unsettling in our culture, and the idea of sexual freedom—in connection with the fear of AIDS—takes on the quality of a parable lost.

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