

AGAINST NATURE. Works in various media at LACE, 1804 Industrial St., downtown; (213) 624-5650. Through Feb. 12. Readings Jan. 20 at Beyond Baroque, 681 Venice Blvd., Venice; (213) 822-3006.

Ecce homo: behold the man. That biblical exclamation graced Nietzsche's last testament, subtitled *How One Becomes What One Is*. It could also be the *cr de coeur* of today's collective Job, the gay community, as it sorts out a new identity for the '90s. It could, that is, but for irresponsible blunders, such as "Against Nature," the current multimedia exhibition featuring works of art by homosexual men.

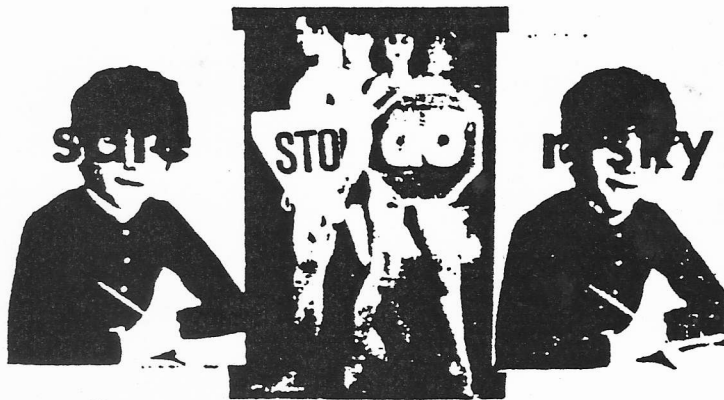
The overflow crowd (in LACE's performance gallery) at Steve Lafreniere and Hudson's *The Back Way* on Jan. 6 — part of "Against Nature" — demonstrated the hunger for work about gay life today. Unfortunately, due to a tired aesthetic and a gallingly myopic vision of gayness, Hudson and Lafreniere's presentation missed the chance to satisfy that hunger. As does the rest of the show.

Curated by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins, "Against Nature" purports, in their words, to speak along "personal lines" to "the ways in which sexual desire informs, distances and empowers the recent history of art made by guys like us," but ends up sabotaging this intention by an undue reliance on modes of art-making right out of the '70s. Rather than giving voice to the new, the effort depicts gayness in an outmoded vocabulary — one that fails to sing a body electric for the '90s and that regards activism as anti-erotic.

In seeking to balance the (perceived) adverse effect of AIDS consciousness on art, Cooper and Hawkins have fallen into the reactionary mode they meant to avoid. They want to re-establish the exuberant Dionysian eroticism of yore, but they've set about it by eclipsing any tracings of AIDS: nothing of the fever of the health debates nor of the warfare of the Establishment upon the gay community — but lots of *GQ* torsos. It's a defensive gesture, ultimately as insincere and hysterical as the raging hetero world it's flailing against. This kind of response only endorses the opposition. The task instead should have been to reformulate the artistic agenda itself.

Which is not to suggest that the perspective of "Against Nature" is due to lack of thought. Instead, it's a case of inadequate thought and confused intent. Hawkins and Cooper have chosen apoliticality — as have other ostriches of the Reagan era — as if that were still a viable, rather than a morally vacuous, option. They presume politicization and a new eroticism to be mutually exclusive.

But credit them for the catalog of writings accompanying "Against Nature" that includes John Greyson's sardonic "Parma Violets: A Video Script." He, at least, resists Hawkins and Cooper's atavistic, and damning, stereotype. From Greyson's Aschenbach (the protagonist of *Death in Venice*): "Dear LACE: I am thrilled to be able to participate in your exquisite exhibit 'Against Nature,' though I really don't know about the title . . . We decorative dandies have been marginalized too long by those puerile politicians, those righteous gay libbers, those dykes and feminists . . ." And from Greyson's Sir Richard Burton: "Dear LACE: I regret I can't participate in your show . . . It's . . .



Untitled (Safe/Risky), by David Bussel.

Nature Morte

the premise, which runs the danger of being renamed 'Against Responsibility,' which suggests our artistic response to this health crisis has been nothing more than an intellectually morbid flap of the wrist."

Form, you see, is content. And when the idiom is retrograde, it should be no surprise that the messages aren't of the moment either. *The Back Way*, for example, was a two-screen slide show set to over-amped music that was to performance what a reunion of KC and the Sunshine Band would be to pop music. Consisting of

several attenuated series of worn images — Aubrey Beardsley drawings for the pre-show, a few abstract/iconographic images, a parade of pretty faces, lotsa crotch shots, some Hallmark scenic vistas, kitschy captions, a droll-but-not-very-clever interlude about two "brothers," and so on — the milieu was one of counterproductive ennui.

This was retrograde *deja vu* with a pointedly pre-AIDS sexuality: close-ups of anal sex sans condoms and no appearance whatsoever of "safe" consciousness or

practices. (Eros, after all, means "life force," but not when you look at it this way, not today.) In its presentation style, its disco-party aura (they took the chairs away and passed out brews at the end to encourage dancing, but not many were in the mood) and its graphic pastiche traversing the thin line between violence and soft porn. *The Back Way* invoked sentimental ideas of what used to be. But you really can't go home again, and the assaultive tone suggested that both the creators, and certainly their audience, already knew as much — denials notwithstanding.

The majority of the static works are similarly lazy and unengaging. Paintings by Kevin Wolff (*Man on a Stick* and *Hanged Man*) compromise their own potential eloquence with rudimentary painterly technique, without any rationale for this lack of sophistication. The quasi-S&M, full-figure portraits literally depict their titles, although they are unsubtly shaded (in blunt, frontal perspective). What you see is what you see, but in this case that's not enough. Carter Potter's half-baked installation, *Basic Plumbing*, is a rectangular stall whose plywood walls begin at thigh height and support an overhead heat lamp. It evokes both the loo and sex dives, but fails to comment on either.

The exceptions to this shallowness — Doug Ischar's *Household Misappropriation: Camouflage So Good One Is Shot At by Other Hunters*, Mike Glass' untitled work and, to a lesser extent, Larry Johnson's three framed prose selections — read their audience the not act about once and future gayness instead of anesthetizing them with one-liners. The brains behind Ischar's multipaneled photo and text assembly is shown in his juxtapositions of the high-brow and the banal: a Marxist tract seems right at home next to a dingy pre-fab living room. Glass recounts a failed encounter between a fictive first person voice — a photographer — and an anonymous Adonis. Three posed portraits and an accompanying narrative tell a tale of attraction, meeting and unrequited lust, without hype or self-congratulation.

The curatorial error here — exemplified by *The Back Way* — is the naive presumption that the fallout of AIDS can be redressed with a reassertion of past gay eroticisms and simple celebratory gestures. But gay males, like many oppressed groups, have passed the stage where the mere assertion of identity is sufficient. Gone are the days when visibility was, in and of itself, an adequate gesture. It's no longer enough to "come out," if in so doing you deny the grist of what you've come out into, namely a universe irrevocably transformed. What would in earlier years have been a veneration is now a denial. Why not envision new, equally vital, ways of being gay and exalt those images? Art that is truly concerned with gender and sexuality cannot be apolitical. And art that seeks to empower the gay identity ought to show individuals and relationships in the process of transfiguration. It must enable those concerned to resist the roles and methods that have imprisoned them in the past by resisting artistic traps. In fact, in an age always ready to reduce art to mere commodity, all art must do this if it's to remain authentic.

"Against Nature" declines to challenge its audience to reimagine itself, and in so doing abjures the artistic and moral imperative of the moment. Rigorous creativity in such a context would bolster both art and the gay community, but as "Against Nature" stands, it's merely enervating. And, as one gay artist put it, "We just don't have time for this." Certainly not in plague time. ■

L.A. WEEKLY

FREE

11 No. 7

News, Movies, Music, Art, Theater, Airwaves, Video

VIDEO

PICK OF THE WEEK

AGAINST NATURE

This video program (part two) is part of LACE's multimedia exhibit by homosexual men centering around the effect of AIDS on the self and society. One does not, of course, have to be gay to respond to this collective outcry. *Tainted Love*, by Peter Christopherson of the British music underground group Coil, is "one of the few" music videos on AIDS, and is notable for the grimly symbolic images (flies drowning in a river of honey, bright flowers adorning a stark gravestone) that accompany the haunting journey of a young man who goes from wheelchair to oxygen tent to body bag as his lover mourns him from a distance, and the living scorn the dying. Tom Kalin's *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* could be classified as an experimental documentary that combines silent-era gay film footage and other erotic images with today's news coverage of the Helms Amendment's stance against funding AIDS awareness material. It is a statement both bitter and insistent, a gay claim to a historic place in the culture. In *Le Voyage de l'Ogre*, by French Canadian videomaker Marc Paradis, candid observations of young Montreal hustlers, masturbation sequences and a highly stylized text provide a context for ruminations on homosexual sex murderer John Wayne Gacy, whose victims were, for all practical purposes, interchangeable with the boys interviewed here. The video thus presents a disturbing juxtaposition between the classic anonymity of the homosexual encounter and the permission which that anonymity gives men like Gacy to annihilate his "brothers" in a strangely collaborative act of self-destruction. Isaac Julien's *This is NOT an AIDS Advertisement* utilizes repetitive images in a stream-of-consciousness look at prohibitions against gay pleasure, and *Danny* (Stashu Kybartas) is a stark, poignant document of the last days of an AIDS victim, told through interviews with him, and flashbacks of the days when, sturdy and adventurous, he rejoiced in his manhood and unknowingly paved the way for his terrible death. Finally, in a welcome bit of comic relief, Vaginal Davis of the Afro Sisters gives us *That Fertile Feeling*, a supremely tacky home-movie-ish sendup in which a screaming queen helps his gerbil-brained friend, Fertile LaToya, to deliver "eleventuplets!" Next week: a review of program three. LACE, 1804 Industrial St., dwntwn.; Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun., noon-5 p.m.; thru Feb. 12.

-Mary Beth Crain

January 27, 1987

VIDEO

PICK OF THE WEEK

AGAINST NATURE: THE THURSDAY PEOPLE

Part three of the video portion of "Against Nature," LACE's current exhibit of works by gay male artists, consists of a single work: George Kuchar's *The Thursday People* (1987). Kuchar is a Bay Area artist with a flair for the basic "raw slice of life" perspective on civilization. A Woody Allenish character whose deadpan New York humor enlivens even the most depressing situations (like the death from AIDS of his friend and fellow independent filmmaker Curt McDowell), Kuchar wanders in and out of rooms and lives, armed with his camera and his wit. What emerges is a portrait of the San Francisco film artist's collective as well as an unpretentious, offbeat look at everything from a highly improvised "soiree" to a Greek festival in Calistoga. Kuchar's fondness for toilet humor (which includes, among other rudenesses, cheerful on-camera farting and a fascination for a miniature commode) is occasionally a bit gruelling, but hey, that's who the man is, okay? And most interestingly, the work is far more cross-cultural than gay in content. LACE, 1804 Industrial St., dwntwn.; thru Feb. 12.

-Mary Beth Crain