

Past Times

Big bison, yearbook hell and photographic surprises at Fleisher.

Challenge Exhibition #3: Hilary Harp, Virgil Marti, Christopher Ransom

Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, 709-721 Catharine St., through Dec. 8.

The installations of Hilary Harp have an engaging clunkiness which reminds us of the conventions of childhood play. They all deal with clichés, but there are differences in the clichés.

In *Resuscitated Bison*, the most ambitious work in the show, Harp attempts to revive an image which had been figuratively — and almost literally — done to death. The bison has a complex resonance with

the movement of the bison's breath; the "resuscitation" is easiest to see from the opposite side of the display, near the pedal animating the vegetation.

Although the technology of *Crying Clown* is clever, it is the weakest of Harp's works, partly because the cliché it illustrates is feeble, surviving mostly in words. Its antecedents are theatrical, and include Watteau's poignant *Gilles* paintings. Today, however, the visual representation of the clown, while tenacious in the lowest of lowbrow culture, is a very minor theme compared to the "Tears of the Clown" variants in music.

Rather than illustrating the paradox suggested by Gilles and dozens of song lyrics (from *Pagliacci* to *Piano Man*), the mechanics of the wall-mounted clown head suggest that this parade of "secret" pathos is a sham. The eyes in the small soft plastic head are supplied with a slow drip of tears by a container of water mounted above. The drops roll down the grotesque, almost sinister face and fall into a bucket placed on the floor. The disembodied clown has a conspicuous source of tears and, furthermore, is utterly without charm — the opposite of the trope which suggests that the entertainer who brings happiness to many is concealing his own misery. Harp here seems to be savaging the appropriated concept — not revitalizing it.

One of the appeals of Harp's work is the mostly wooden machinery which operates the buffalo bellows and the oversize cogwheel which controls a translucent yellow *Sunrise* behind a grey skyline. These are amusing structures in themselves: they are easy to understand, sturdy and inviting.

Where Harp shamelessly exposes her magic, creaking gears, wormy electric wires and all, Virgil Marti presents an impenetrable unblemished surface in his room-size installation. This glossy approach defines his subject: high school yearbooks and the elaborate stylized bravado which is so much a part of the culture which produces them.

Marti's dimly lighted gallery is lined with mirrors screened with yearbook photos. Visitors see themselves through an endless grid of smiling young masks. This work should be compared with the artist's earlier *Bully Wallpaper*, in which a colorful blacklight repeat pattern of yearbook portraits of young males is more intense and, as presented in

some contexts, more claustrophobic.

The Fleisher installation emphasizes the almost desperate narcissistic cool of Midwestern teenagers: attitude is everything in banal prom-night rites of passage. In the middle of the gallery Marti has placed a parody yearbook on a crushed velvet covered pedestal. It has a padded stamped cover. The opening and closing pages continue a half-tone pattern of portrait faces. Inside are vellum pages of yearbook inscriptions printed like poetry, their conventions and mysteries as naked as Harp's electric wires. The girls write, "You are sweet! Love ya!" Boys and girls say, "Keep in touch."

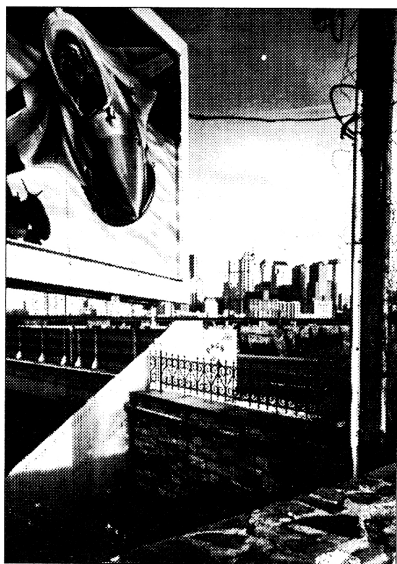
But it's all about distance and differentness. Years ago I went with a gay friend to see the movie *Grease*. He left in the middle and waited in the lobby for me. He said he couldn't stand to be so vividly reminded of high school. Marti has said something similar about his work, that it's about his own experience as a gay middle-class teenager. It's hard to be young and gay — by any definition of that word — in our society.

Christopher Ransom's traditional photographs come as a surprise after two galleries of installations. The smallish black and white prints seem understated by contrast with room-size works, but each picture offers something new.

Texture and pattern are among Ransom's primary visual interests. He approaches them through the natural world, notably in *Copper Beach*, the joint of a tree trunk wrinkled like elephant skin, and in *Sandform # 3*, an erosion pattern like ice crystals. But he also responds to the made environment, as in *Looking Glass Wall*, a photograph of an old advertising painting on a wall which has acquired a chaotic checkered beauty through weathering.

Pagan Flight also offers a created image, that of a fighter plane on a billboard, where it appears to be flying over the Center City skyline visible in the distance. The picture takes its name from a Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN) sign on Spring Garden Street bridge below the sign. Ransom's large-format view camera produces the clarity and depth of field which make this picture particularly effective.

Ascension and *Bicycle* both center on skeletal objects given up by silt or sand, while *The Garden* enhances a skimpy strip of urban vegetation with calligraphic shadows cast on a wall patterned with swirling gouges. This layering of markings is even more effective than Ransom's double exposures *Main Street* and *Choice 1269/1270*, though the latter, with its silhouette of a building superimposed on doorways, offers an effectively bewildering symmetry.



Christopher Ransom, *Pagan Flight* (1992), black and white photo.

American identity. It reminds us of the pursuit and taming of a frontier, the near destruction of a species (and by extension the destruction of the environment itself), and of the bison's ultimate preservation as a kitsch tourist attraction.

Harp offers a kind of realism: a life-size hair-covered model of a bison standing in a field of flowers with wriggly stems mounted on green wooden islands — a sort of Munchkin prairie. This work is interactive, and Harp's instructions to the visitor are clear and inviting. Stepping on a pedal at one side of the bison field causes the islands and their flowers to vibrate, bouncy and squeaky as old bedsprings. This repetitive motion seems almost to mock pioneers' descriptions of wild grasses rippling across the limitless treeless vista of the great plains — a sight forever vanished from this land.

The installation, which is best experienced by two or three people, is set up so that the bison's chest can be inflated with a large bellows pumped by one person. That person, however, can't actually see the sub-