

vision

Beautiful People

Two collaborative painters take the plunge into video

BY ADAM E. MENDELSON

Markus Muntean and Adi Rosenblum's seductive paintings re-contextualize classical notions of the figure in contemporary environments. In so doing, they confront the viewer with the synthetic nature of constructed fantasies and the hollow aspirations of the images' real-life referents. Since 1992—up until their recent show where they used their own photographs of “normal” people as source material—the artists have

made figurative paintings and drawings based on youthful subjects found in lifestyle magazines, and actors from films. They're body-beautiful hipsters cut-and-pasted together, replete with luxury trappings. (Think Kelly LeBrock's Lisa from *Weird Science*.) Recasting these idealized figures in landscapes and interiors, the images of vacuous, label-worshipping youth also often directly refer to old master paintings (such as Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*) and suggest that consumerism has replaced spirituality in contemporary life. The way in which the images have been cobbled together from various sources underlines the idea of constructed identity (or the impossibility of constructing one) in a media-saturated society.

That spiritual aspirations have been exchanged for material ones is also echoed by the grandiose melancholy found in the artists' little-seen videos (on display at New York's Team Gallery last March). In *To Die For* (02), a camera tracks left to right across a parking lot occupied by teenagers positioned in languid, Michelangelo-esque poses. There's a girl perusing a map, a boy on a BMW bike, someone checking their text messages, and a kid reclining on a skateboard as if it were a chaise longue. Accompanied by

baroque music that has been appropriately recombined from different sources, *To Die For* runs on an endless loop; the leisurely camera moves in stark contrast to the rapid flow of traffic on the horizon. The poetic narration, strung together from fragments of found text, binds the images to the somewhat cryptic ruminations about memory and figurative archetypes.

Shroud (06) is formally of a piece with *To Die For*, and opens with a shot of a brooding, cloudy sky that emotionally parallels the gaze heavenward experienced outside countless cathedrals and chapels. Like the earlier video, *Shroud* consists of young people in contemporary environments enacting classical allegories. The video follows two young people on a quest through a vaguely postapocalyptic wasteland where they eventually encounter a bearded man asleep in a trailer—an almost static scene that, in terms of its ethereal light and severe foreshortening, faithfully re-creates Andrea Mantegna's 1490 painting *The Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*. The fridge-magnet-poetry narration begins: “One day, when we don't expect things to happen, when everything high above passes on just like everything down

below—somewhere along the road, we lose our way. Like sleep walkers. Entirely without will. Without consciousness. Without desire. Without defense. We collect the remnants of this world, patching up emptiness. Names which are now only sounds, lost faces. Our heads full of words. Little by little everything slips away from us. Our whole life. Our memories, our ambitions, as if they were wind blowing clouds.”

It's not surprising that Muntean and Rosenblum originally presented their paintings in comic-book form—or that their work is often associated with Renaissance artists. There's an often overlooked precedent to filmmaking in the frescoes lining the walls of the Uffizi in Florence—they are images that tell stories frame by frame, just as comics and films do. So it makes sense that the videos are composed and arranged in the same way that the paintings are. Freeze-frames could easily produce still images for use as source material for the paintings. What makes the artists' videos so moving—and so theoretically elusive—may very well have something to do with their overwhelming sincerity in the face of the art world's all too easy and dominant cynicism. □



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