

Art in America

Maria Marshall at Team

For her first New York show, the British artist Maria Marshall showed a 20-second video of a toddler smoking a cigarette. In three slow-motion clips, he sucks, deeply inhales, and luxuriantly blows out smoke rings; these shots are repeated four times, until the screen is suffused with smoke and the sequence loops again. Unfortunately, because of this subject matter and the fact that the child is the artist's own two-year-old son, the piece was inevitably discussed during the show's run as though its primary intent was sensationalistic. That's a shame, because Marshall's real achievement has been to create a video whose exacting construction, brief duration and lush look give it the concentrated force of a painting.

To make the piece, Marshall spent several hours filming her son playing with a toy cigarette. From this, she culled the few moments when his expression was deadpan; these clips, originally shot on 35mm film stock, were digitized and mixed with other footage of smoking adults, then transferred to laser disk. Though the child's image was virtually unaltered, the smoke was manipulated with the special-effects program Flame, which gives all the wisps, clouds and rings a slightly cartoonish air. The montage that results ini-

tially registers as nearly sepia-toned; yet on closer inspection, it also appears to be composed of glowingly colored benday dots.

Precisely because of these special effects, it's obvious that what we're watching is fake. At the same time, like all good surrealism, the piece clearly addresses human truths that register as completely real. Other artists, most notably Gillian Wearing in her video *10-16*, have hinted at the inner motivations of adults by having them mouth children's words. In this case, presented with a child who plays so bewitchingly at being grown-up, the viewer's mind effectively fast-forwards from spontaneous childhood play to the hardened habit of adult desire. Watching the baby focus so intently on his cigarette, then exhale as if he were blowing bubbles, one inevitably thinks of how smoking is linked to breast-feeding, thumb-sucking and all the other reflexive oral fixations of childhood. (Even the topsy-turvy logic of the video's title, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Cooker*, is something Marshall's child actually said.) And as this action endlessly repeats itself, it assumes a curiously dreamlike air that becomes fantastically mesmerizing. Clearly, the true sensationalism on view here is Marshall's seductive way with film.

—Carol Kino

Maria Marshall: Video still from *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Cooker*, 1998, 20-second video loop; at Team.

