

Art By Edward J. Sozanski

Trolling for clarity on the future

The state of contemporary art suggests a mighty river that, after a long period of flowing between readily defined banks, debouches into a marshy delta veined by dozens of narrow, meandering channels in which even seasoned navigators can easily become lost.

Like the confused boatman, the art enthusiast can only hope that the channel he or she has chosen will lead to open water — to fresh insights not only about art, but about our culture generally. But is such a thing still possible? Does art still have the capacity to clarify, or has it become too solipsistic for that role?

The exhibition "Post Millennial Fizzy" at Beaver College Art Gallery promises to forecast the future, but a visitor quickly discovers that the promised land already has arrived. The show's observations about current art and society are pointed, but they also inevitably reflect the way current art sometimes turns in on itself and becomes uncomfortably self-reverential.

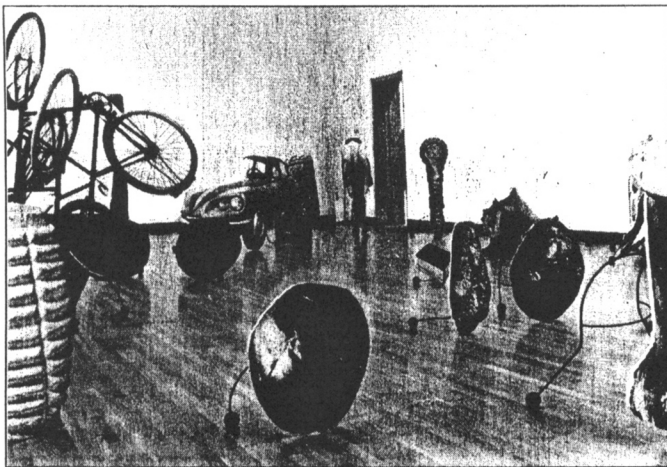
The exhibition consists of work by Los Angeles artists, all under 40. It was curated by painter Adam Ross and Julie Joyce, director of the Luckman Fine Arts Gallery at California State University, Los Angeles.

Their concept — and the exhibition title — are drawn from a 1995 futuristic novel by David Foster Wallace called *Infinite Jest*. The story describes an entertainment-obsessed society addicted to a form of visual diversion that combines television, video and the Internet. It's so engaging that anyone who watches it loses all desire to do anything else.

People in this society are narcotized not only by this entertainment, but also by the tidal wave of information that washes over them every day. As Marshall McLuhan predicted, the medium has become the message, but a self-serving, meaningless one. Image has become paramount, and identities — of people, messages and things — have become ambiguous.

Sound familiar?

The artists in "Fizzy" (a soft drink in the novel) play off this scenario in various ways. David Schafer offers a bright yellow sculpture that resembles seating in fast-food restaurants — three stools linked by steel bars into a triadic unit. Whether *Cluster 38* is furniture posing as sculpture or sculpture mim-



"Photogravity" at the Art Museum consists of 28 "photo-sculptures" by Gabriel Orozco, a Mexican sculptor and photographer living in New York.

icking furniture doesn't matter; it reads the same either way, and neither perception is very interesting.

Robert Stone's *Low Lawn Chair/00* is more inviting. It's a functional chair of tubular aluminum and webbing that people can sit on — a washed-out color photograph of a man and a woman doing just that proves the point, although they don't look very comfortable.

Folded up, as it is in the show, the chair exhibits more sculptural properties than Schafer's *Cluster 38*. But the photo communicates the mannered gloss of advertising, suggesting that *Low Lawn Chair* is less an art object than a consumer product.

Such infiltration of decoration and function into the realm of art has become common. Jorge Pardo's current installation at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, a transformation of its office space in a "cafe-video lounge," stands (or sits) as a more elaborate example.

One can interpret such works in one of two contrasting ways: They either affirm the continuing vitality of art, or they demonstrate that art has run out of viable aesthetic options, and, like a mutant virus, has begun to impersonate other genres.

What would be appropriate art for a society that worships image and celebrity? Perhaps T. Kelly Mason's adaptation of a 1977 performance piece by Vito Acconci. By modifying a recording of Acconci's stream-of-consciousness monologue with computer-generated signals, Mason accomplishes two things: He recreates, on a small scale, the jumble of electronic infor-

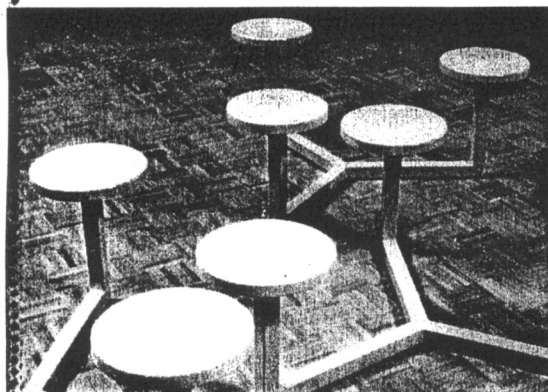
persona with that of a celebrity. One half of *Rose* is a digital photograph that combines the artist's facial features with those of Rose McGowan, wife of rock musician Marilyn Manson — a minor-league "celebrity" at that. The bottom half of the piece is a video monitor that displays a tape of the artist's continually fidgeting feet. Perhaps they're uncomfortable supporting two people in one body.

Computers are becoming increasingly more prominent in art-making. Jennifer Steinkamp used one to generate the abstraction called *Flutter Flutter* that projects into a corner of the gallery. The image suggests rhythmically beating wings, such as those of a butterfly, that move to the cadence of human breathing. The technology is more intriguing than the result, but so it was in the early years of photography.

The piece that speaks most forcefully to information saturation is Miriam Dym's 9-by-18-foot computer print, *Blue and Slate Map With Orange Inserts*. This mural-size drawing does, indeed, resemble a city map so effectively that a viewer can't avoid trying to figure out which city it is. Actually, it's just a network of lines that lead nowhere and describe nothing, a simulation without meaning whose only validity is its form.

The art in "Post Millennial Fizzy" is generally more engaging for the See SOZANSKI on 19

Joseph Santarromana does a much more literal job of fusing his



"Cluster 38" by David Schafer is in "Post Millennial Fizzy" at Beaver College.

Image trumps identity

SOZANSKI from 18 insights and warnings it encodes about the evolution of societal values than for the profundity of individual pieces. But, as noted, evolution is moving so rapidly that even art in Los Angeles, the capital of illusion, seems well behind the curve.

What, exactly, is the nature of an aesthetic encounter? Is an interaction with a painting or sculpture different qualitatively from looking at its image? Is the same information communicated, and is the viewer's response comparable?

Gabriel Orozco, a Mexican artist living in New York, investigates these propositions in an installation called "Photogravity" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The show is the fifth in a series of projects in which artists interact with the permanent collection.

The central issue in "Photogravity" is whether sculpture is substantially transformed when it's presented two-dimensionally, as photographs in actual scale and profile. Do we see sculpture, or photographs, or some intermediary stage between the two?

Orozco, a sculptor and photographer, has created his installation from two sets of images. One set consists of catalog photos of pre-Columbian sculptures given to the museum in 1950 by Louise and Walter Arensberg. The other photos depict some of Orozco's own sculptures, which are unconventional both in materials and in attitude.

One is a Citroen automobile from which a two-foot section was removed, after which the two halves were welded back together. Another is four bicycles connected by their seats and handlebars, still another a human skull painted with a black-and-white checkerboard pattern.

For each object, Orozco enlarged its black-and-white image to actual size, mounted it on a sheet of foam-core board, then reduced it to an exact outline, which was fixed to a black-metal support so it would stand on the floor.

The 28 "photo-sculptures" were then set up in Gallery 176 in the 20th-century wing, contemporary and ancient pieces mixed together. The smaller sculptures are placed near the center, the larger ones at

the corners and along one long wall.

Visitors can walk through the array, but can see the images only from one direction, the "front." They should notice a curious phenomenon — when presented this way, the pre-Columbian pieces and Orozco's contemporary work begin to resemble one another. Furthermore, actual scale doesn't make the sculptures more intelligible, especially Orozco's.

The stone pre-Columbian sculptures look lighter, not just because they're photographs but because their gravitational quality, which is part of their essence, has been drained away, even while scale and surface detail are preserved.

The more one contemplates this installation, the more the two groups of sculpture appear to be equivalent. This tells us that while photographs can be presented as objects, they can't successfully convey the full essence of any single one. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional perception are as fundamentally different as sound and light.

I realize that sounds obvious in the telling, but "Photogravity" makes it seem like a revelation.

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