

WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Joe Schmelzer Press:

Pride 2004

Old Wine In New Skins

by Lawrence Schubert

Everything old is new again in the cultural time warp created by the Bush Administration. The tone is lighter in some areas, notably darker in others, the shock of September 11, 2001 simultaneously heightening and deepening the American response to life in general, fostering a more blasé attitude toward certain issues and a deeply impassioned response to others.

Gay politics, vividly exemplified by the nationwide frenzy of same-sex nuptials earlier this year, have after years of assimilation and gentrification returned to the forefront of American culture. Since the United States Supreme Court overturned the Texas sodomy laws last year, the so-called "gay agenda" is back in-the-face of Average Joe and back on the common table of the masses, dissected during dinner hour by everyone from Andrew Sullivan to Bill O'Reilly.

Conversely, gay art and artists, possibly chastened by the travails of Ellen Degeneres and Rosie O'Donnell, have soft-pedaled their social agendas in favor of a wider inclusion. With Bruce Weber's breezy, ambiguous sensuality now firmly entrenched in the vocabulary of advertising, homoeroticism has become a market commodity, while the influence of more confrontational artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz, cultural provocateurs of the Reagan era, has gradually shifted to the more oblique, benign, and sexless example of Andy Warhol. This is not a retreat into blandness as much as a retrenchment into something more subtle, almost subliminal, and ultimately, much more subversive. Except in the field of hardcore eroticism—which has always maintained its own, sometimes shaky podium—the term "gay art" is becoming an unnecessary redundancy.

There are no metrosexuals in Patrick Lee's portfolio. Lee's graphite portraits of blue-collar icons—fireman, soldiers, football players—delineate the old-fashioned virtues of untrammled masculinity in a world before irony, post-modernism, and Straight Eye for the Queer Guy. Despite the classical elegance and formidable breadth of his technique, Lee survived a brief, uninspiring stab at art school and is largely self-taught, inspired instead by a childhood diet of comic art by Boris Vallejo and Frank Frazetta. As Florenz Ziegfeld glorified the American girl, Lee enshrines the American Male, and there is more than a little anthropology in his objectives. "I loved the technical precision of artists like Frazetta and Tom of Finland, but my outlook is totally rooted in reality," the ginger-haired artist comments. "I love blue-collar guys; I am fascinated by the whole male mystique and with male posturing, both straight and gay. I despise that whole 'metrosexual' movement—rather than the best of two worlds, it gives us the lowest common denominator of both. It's still a man's world, but there are many new challenges to the primacy of the heterosexual male—gays and women primarily—but also to his position in the workplace is being uprooted and challenged. Men have a whole new set of issues to deal with—the times are redefining our view of masculinity, and I'm just taking notes." The strength, resoluteness, almost heroic quality of Lee's subjects creates a subliminal and not entirely unintended erotic tension in his portraits, but their formal elegance could pass muster in a boardroom, boding well for Lee's continued evolution as artist and anthropologist.

Two's company and three's a couple in the world of photographer Joe Schmelzer. With his life as his thesis and boyfriends Noah and Clate as his constant muses, Schmelzer balances his personal portfolio—an insightful, occasionally eye-opening examination of his domestic

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triad—with an unaffected sideline in commercial and corporate portraiture. Upon graduating in 1995 from the Rochester Institute of Technology with a B.A. in Fine Arts, Schmelzer embarked on a career in magazine photography, finding success but not fulfillment. Inspired by the color sense and air of dislocation in photographs by William Eggleston, and Steven Shore, whose “Uncommon Places” he lists as a watershed influence, Schmelzer climbed into his car and headed West. He acquired a Masters of Fine Arts from the California Institute of the Arts, then began the body of work for which he is most known—a documentation of his relationship and home-life with two other gay males. In his commercial work, impatient with the machinations and ego-battles of Hollywood celebrity photography, Schmelzer eschewed studio lighting and computer gloss in favor of an almost Dogme-style naturalism. “ I like to find people in their natural environments,” Schmelzer relates, “then step back and give them room to breathe and move around.”

There is plenty of breathing and moving around in Schmelzer's fly-on-the-wall examination of his own, admittedly unorthodox, home environment. In a situation ripe for exploitation, there is nary a whiff of Dude Dormism or narcissism in Schmelzer's portfolio, only a meditative, wryly amusing, and poignant examination of what seems to be a perfectly sane, grounded, and normal relationship, albeit between three rather than two. Schmelzer's current one-man show, at Culver City's Western-Project, riffs on the idea of “pairs of threes,” with everything from three pillows on a bed to three tall trees in the forest, stands-ins for the Schmelzer and the two saplings he shares his life and artistry with.

Pedro Palanca is an artist, ethnographer, and foot fetishist living in Lima, Peru. In Palanca's oeuvre the sum of the parts is more than equal to the whole, and the hole as well. What Tom of Finland is to the crotch, Palanca is to the humble foot, Sole Brother #1. His sexy bipeds recalls R. Crumb's ubiquitous “Keep on Truckin” dude, but with a dose of steroids enhancing his shoe size. Palanca finds his subjects, working men and laborers, in the streets of Lima, employ-ing a mixture of surveillance and voyeurism to surreptitiously stalk and capture his prey on film. Working in graphite, colored pencils, and ink markers on found, idiosyncratically patterned papers (cardboard beer holders, old calendar pages, graph sheets), and despite the graphic, hardcore scenarios that frequently define his drawings, there is a sweetness and innocence to Palanca's universe and the men who occupy it not unlike that seen in the utopian vision of Tom of Finland. In a supersized world, Palanca is really only applying current market standards to his erotic fixation.

Rodriel is an artist who works in situ, a transient artist inspired by transient muses. Think Jacob Riis meets Jean Cocteau, or How the Other Half Lives meets The White Paper. Tall, androgynous, and quietly imposing, with an palpable resemblance to jazz legend Billie Holiday, Rodriel grew up in the South, lives in Los Angeles, and has experienced almost as much “strange fruit” as Lady Day in pursuing his artistic muse. Look at a drawing by Rodriel and the drawing looks back. His subjects are average men, nude and always rendered solo, singular in the amplification of their ordinariness. The artist encounters his muses in mundane locations—on the street, exiting bus stations, in coffee shops—places where one is permitted to linger, but only in passing. Burdened by periods of homelessness, Rodriel has surmounted obstacles that would dissuade a lesser artist, but with a one-man exhibition, “Some Men,” last year at Los Angeles's Headquarters gallery, and the inclusion of two works in Hollywood's new Erotic Museum, he has seen an upswing in his fortunes. Which is not to say he has abandoned his old hunting grounds: If you encounter a tall, imposing, androgynous gentleman resembling Billie Holiday (sans gardenia) on Hollywood Boulevard who asks to do your portrait, two things are reasonably assured. You are talking to Rodriel—who has one name only, like an archangel—and you'll probably be nude within the hour.

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David Crocker is a painter, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. He doesn't shoot paint out his asshole: he works in oils, or watercolors, on canvas, with a brush. Only in Los Angeles, could something as traditional as painting on canvas be considered unusual, but among his peers Crocker is almost peerless. His delicately rendered paintings, both abstract and representational, have the layered, textured depth of an older sensibility.

Lesbianism is a fact of life for artist Alicia McCarthy, but not the *raison d'être* of her art. Alumni of the San Francisco Art Institute, McCarthy works in painting and sculpture, utilizing a variety of found objects as components and found woods as her canvases. Though abstract in nature, McCarthy refers to her works as "landscapes," the harmony and dissonance inherent in nature underpinning her sensibility. Grounded in the same street-savvy sensibility as fellow Bay Area artists Chris Johansen, Barry McGee, and his wife, the late Margaret Killgallen, McCarthy quickly dismisses any highfalutin' art-talk explanation for her mediums of choice. "I'm just broke," she laughs. "I like discarded objects, things I'll find at construction sites or similar places, because they often bear the mark of someone else's work. I like to create content by recontextualizing objects. McCarthy has shown in group exhibitions at The Luggage Store, the Yerba Buena Center For the Arts, and other San Francisco hot-spots, and had her first solo exhibition at the city's Jack Hanley Gallery in 2003.

Lesbianism is a fact of life for artist Emily Roysdon, and the *raison d'être* of her art as well. Roysdon, along with collaborators k8 Hardy and Ginger Brooks Takahashi, publishes *Lesbians To The Rescue*, a "zine cum art journal" investigating "queer genders and identities" which just moved from two dimensions to three with a gallery installation at Marsea Goldberg's New Image Art in West Hollywood. The installation, coordinated by Roysdon and independent curator Darin Klein, provided a convenient bit of synchronicity for the New York City-based artist's move to Los Angeles where she is currently enlarging her academic profile with MFA studies at UCLA under the tutelage of veteran artist Mary Kelly. "We're here to constitute a new team under an old threat," is how Roysdon capsulized LTTR's mission statement in its debut issue. Roysdon was embarked on a mission of another sort when contacted at her Los Angeles residence. "Yesterday I was mad at Los Angeles," is her reply to my predictable query about culture shock accompanying her shift to the palm latitudes, "but today I'm painting my whole room in chalkboard paint so I can write on the walls." No one but an artist would revel in revisiting the purgatory of public school, but for a text-based artist like Roysdon, nirvana is a bedroom that is also a three-dimensional text message.

If photographer Richard Renaldi's body of work had a title it might be *How to Achieve Naturalism in a Photo-Sensitive Age*. Labeled

a humanist by his supporters, Renaldi's detractors are more difficult to locate, his portraiture occupying an irony-free zone in marked contrast to the hyperventilating tendencies characteristic of contemporary fashion and celebrity representation. With a BFA in photography from New York University, Renaldi keeps a studio in downtown Los Angeles's historic Orpheum Theatre building on Broadway. HIV-positive since 1996, the photographer has devoted a sizable portion of his portfolio to putting a living, human face on those afflicted with the AIDS as well as its long-term survivors. If there is a special poignancy to this portfolio, it is because the photographer has been so resolutely clear-eyed in his depictions, striving for neither pity nor victimization, only inclusion. Renaldi had his first one-man exhibition, the critically acclaimed *Fresno/Newark*, last December at Manhattan's Debs & Co. gallery in Chelsea. He was included in *Strangers*, the International Center for Photography's first triennial, and has an upcoming solo exhibition at L.A.'s Western Project.

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Finally, complementing all this new wine is a vintage brew that has cellared extremely well. Robert Richards wears big glasses, like Carrie Donovan, and is an Elder Statesman among gay artists, having survived the Old Order and the old century to find a revival of interest in his evocative, stylized renderings of the porn gods of the pre-condom era. Originally commissioned for gay sex magazines such as Topman, Richards' iconography is arguably as vital to the brief, colorful history of gay theatrical porn as George Hurrell's is to the pantheon of stars from Hollywood's Studio Era. Richards, who stood in line to see Boys in the Sand next to Jacqueline Onassis, had his immaculate, airbrushed way with every porn icon from Casey Donovan to Jeff Stryker, but it is the early, pre-video performers, like Al Parker, or Peter Berlin, who retain the most charisma. In this new century, where porn has become an equal opportunity employer, the old days of the Adonis Theatre and the notorious Park-Miller are lost in the sands of time. Some of that sand, however, and the boys that frolicked in it, live on in Richard's iconic drawings.

Everything old is new again, but you can't go home again.

Joe Schmelzer

New Photographs

June 24 – July 24, 2004

Opening reception for the artist:

Saturday, June 26 th from 5–8pm.



Western Project is pleased to present the first solo exhibition of Los Angeles artist/photographer, Joe Schmelzer. An MFA graduate and current teacher at Cal Arts, Schmelzer catalogues his domestic life with two mates. As a triad, they travel frequently across America - staying in motels in the Northern California woods, cabins in Cape Cod, or in the desert at Joshua Tree. The settings are generic family accommodations, and the images could be anyone's vacation - but are something more – moments of intense looking by an artist that intimately understands his surroundings and those people around him. Be it a clock on the table, or mate smoking a cigarette, or three redwood trees, the images are lush meditations on the wonder of ordinary life. It is this sense of ultra normalcy that permeates all of Schmelzer's work. The work defies sweetness or irony by the artist's immense sense of generosity – the world he is documenting is one of choice, and a continuous journey of feeling. It is these two qualities which separate his work from other contemporary male photographers – Schmelzer points his camera away from drama and exoticism as he is interested in the ecstatic equilibrium of his relationships and his eternal sense of home.

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FLAUNT Issue 55 - Fresh Heir
EXHIBITIONISM by Christopher Miles
pages 193-194



Joe Schmelzer: New Photographs on view June 24 - July 24 at Western Project

In his first solo gallery show, Schmelzer passes on the vogue of spectacle gripping much of current photography and instead offers up a small road story of sorts. Shot in assorted natural surroundings, or in vacation-spot rental cabins and roadside motel rooms, his quiet and intimate yet subtly intense pictures chronicle the travels, interactions and intertwinings of Schmelzer and his two ambiguously identified "mates," Noah and Clate. Suggestive yet tame, the pictures reveal, in light hints and little moments, a tender, almost innocent affection between three lads - no drama, no saccharine, no smirking, just something, as it turns out, wonderfully ordinary.



PICTURE Snaps LA by Jamie Waugh page 20

THE BEST THINGS COME IN THREES

Filmic depictions of the threesome have been alluring for years, from Francois Tuffaut's Jules et Jim to Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mama Tambien*. A photographic study of the dynamics of such a relationship - in this case, Joe Schmelzer's own "mono"-gamous relationship

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between himself and two other men -- is the subject of the LA based photographer's solo show this month. The autobiographical montage starts with his New York to Los Angeles move, lending uncertainty, transience and intimacy to landscapes, interiors and portraits of himself and boyfriends Clate and Noah. The voyeuristic images are set in hotel rooms, forests, and in bathrooms; and the sensibility is as clean and white as fresh linens rather than anything red light. Schmelzer replaces clichés of the sexually promiscuous and morally thin gay man in Los Angeles with this compelling study of simple human connection. "What I seem to be focusing on is the dynamics of a three-person relationship. It's such a fantastic idea. The pictures make it seem, through the use of banal moments and simple family-oriented pictures, quite everyday instead of something crazy. I'm taking this life that many people see as extraordinary and showing it as ordinary."

The Photographs of Joe Schmelzer

Sometimes it is easy to overlook the intimate moments with a loved one or close friends as a subject of art making. Those moments are at the same time private and yet common. Schmelzer's photographs make us aware of the importance to one's emotional state and well being that the small seemingly routine occurrences can be. His camera looks lovingly at the people close to him, especially his partners Clate and Noah. Joe has a finely tuned sense of what are the right pictures to make that will describe, not only physically, but psychologically the tenor of his relationships. The appearance of the places in which Joe, Clate and Noah find themselves as they travel, the food they eat, and the places that they stay, all comprise a life lived perhaps without extraordinary drama in each moment but with a fullness and richness that Joe describes in his photographs. They are beautifully executed, filled with the tactile qualities of skin against domestic objects. They hold a fascination for the viewer, who cannot help compare these lives with his/her own. I may never have been to the particular places in these photographs, but I am familiar with everything in them. I enjoy being the voyeur into other lives through these powerful images, and I find myself satisfied with the pleasure of recognition that the artist has described about my own life as well as about his.

Jo Ann Callis

August 1999
