



Rocky Schenk, *Untitled*, 1987, color photograph, 20 x 16".

ROCKY SCHENK

TOM CUGLIANI GALLERY

The depiction of the female nude as a depersonalized object for viewing has been considered problematic for several decades, but only in recent times have such portrayals provoked more insistent negative criticism. Rocky Schenk's slick, sophisticated images of the female figure dominated his recent exhibition of photographs here (all untitled, all but two from 1987).

Taken on a superficial level, these images could automatically elicit a negative response if not for an ambiguity of intention. Schenk's work appears to be neither explicitly sexist nor cleverly subversive. At the same time that the photographs reveal the dangerous roots of an anonymous depiction of the glamorized female figure, they fall back into standardized reinforcements of such outmoded views.

Clearly Schenk looks to the most stylized and recognizable glamour photographers associated with the Hollywood tradition of the 1930s: George Platt Lynes, Horst P. Horst, and Paul Outerbridge. Whether the photos are in black and white or in color, Schenk's pictures encapsulate this fashionable perspective with seamless perfection. The less imaginative pieces appear to be self-conscious adaptations of these photographers' conventions, including silky black shadows, mysterious back lighting, and the deliberately unnatural positioning of women's nude bodies, shot primarily as headless torsos. If Schenk had not included a few images of male nudes, the notion of these works as a conscious critique of sexist attitudes in glamour photography would not even have occurred to most viewers. The fact that the male images are rarely headless and that only the female images feature such compositional devices as erotic highlighting of lips, surrealist overlaying of facial elements on the figure, or decorative abstract patterns used to conceal the figure points out a critical difference in gender identification in Schenk's work. This aberrant distinction becomes the only clue that his agenda includes more than the mere assimilation of certain photo-

graphic mannerisms.

The most haunting aspect of the female figures, apart from the frequent exclusion of faces, is a very matter-of-fact sense of deadness. Despite the lushness of the drapery in the backgrounds and the sensuality of yellow scarves draped over crotches in two particular images, Schenk's lighting gives certain women's bodies an alabaster coldness drained of life and emotion. In one particularly disturbing color photograph, a woman is suspended upside down, her head and shoulders resting on a support covered with crushed yellow velvet extending from an open pair of drapes. She smiles tranquilly, oblivious to her uncomfortable portrayal as a compositional device. The white blankness of her skin is accentuated by the heightened artificiality of her red lipstick and a yellow-red flower which sits between her breasts. Schenk's adherence to these signifiers of sensuality is so overwhelmingly exact that the true implications of the image become blurred. Did Schenk present this image as a simple homage to a genre of photography that helped to promote unhealthy gender distinctions, or is this piece meant to exploit the horrifying power of such manipulative imagery? The answer is never clear in this show.

Schenk hops from this extreme of representation to a more evocative image, of a woman's darkened figure covered with eyes of various sizes, as if they were emerging from her body. This photographic trick actually provokes the imagination more than any other piece in the way it turns the spectator's gaze back on itself with a vengeance. Such notable examples are diluted by the general lack of conceptual clarity found in these controversial positionings of women in photography.

—Jude Schwendenwien