

PICTURES AND MEANING Peter Frank

Los Angeles

There is an odd, even troubling exhibition at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. It is called *Pictures*, and the work in it contains, even concerns, pictorial imagery. But the show should give little comfort to those who yearn for a return to representation. The art in *Pictures* examines modes of depiction that are socially and esthetically more probing and skeptical than any more traditional, self-motivated form of figuration could be.

Pictures displays the methods of five New York artists who investigate how the images we see these days to about meaning what they mean. As curator Douglas Crimp writes in his catalog essay: "Next to these pictures firsthand experience seems to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While once it seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it." In the work of the five artists chosen by Crimp, the subject matter is not the image, but the image of the image. These artists have isolated their images, deprived them of their original contexts and liberated them from referent visual structures. As a result, the work subverts or at least exploits the significance that our acculturated experience has given to these images, practically cutting them loose from any reference whatsoever.

Robert Longo's images, rendered as wall reliefs, are derived mostly, if not exclusively, from movies. But even the sharpest film buffs would have trouble recognizing this, at least without a prior glance at the titles. Longo's images are "stills" of action — of a man arching forward (as he gets shot in the back), of a little figure running away from the foreground, of a cowboy on horseback seen, in Muybridgean sequence, riding upward and rightward out of a large silver mass. The contexts for this activity — the motivation for the movement — have been removed, as if Longo had taken single frames and blotted out everything but the focal figure in each. What remains are pieces of moments — snatched from *Missouri Breaks*, *The American Soldier* and other classics — released circumstantially from their movies and isolated from the narrative context which made them memorable in the first place.

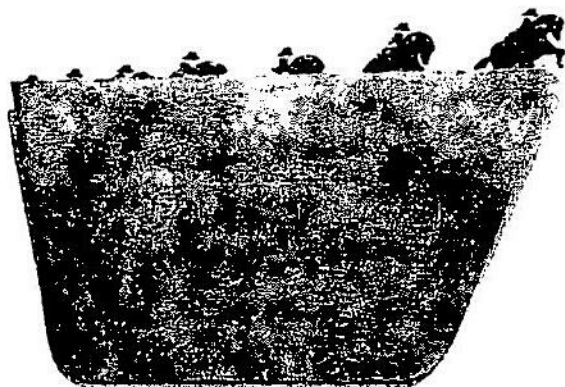
Jack Goldstein has reversed Longo's process of pictorial derivaton: he has turned initially banal images into films. Goldstein's projected images still exist outside of context, isolated against vivid backgrounds of a single color so that they stand out like insignias on a flag. There are sly and comic references to the history of the film medium. *Shane*, three minutes of a German shepherd's head as he barks and pauses, suggests both Rin-Tin-Tin and William Wegman's dog Man Ray, while the gradually elongating and suddenly disappearing colors reflected in *The Knife* remind one of familiar, even clichéd, melodramatic devices. In *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* Goldstein has taken his image

directly from a cinematic source — the roaring lion in the MGM logo — but has run it back and forth into a temporally symmetric pattern, so that the lion continues to nod this way and that, emitting periodic roars.

Goldstein's sound recordings, which have occupied most of his attention in the past year, establish an even stranger interpretation of the idea of image-as-phenomenon. The sounds available on the records provide mere suggestion where histrionics implied by the titles would be expected: a lot of splashing instead of watery cries for help in *The Drown*, or the mere sound of chopping rather than the crash of timber in triplicate for *Three Felled Trees*. Goldstein also presents associative rather than actual sounds as aural image-cues: he represents *The Murder* not as stealthy footsteps and a scream, but with eerie atonal soundtrack-type music that could have been borrowed from any suspense flick. The records function visually as well as sonically: they are colored as appropriately as possible to the subject.

Sons and Lovers is Sherrie Levine's single contribution to *Pictures*. It is a wall-sized series of thirty-six pairs of silhouetted heads rendered in fluorescent tempera on graph paper. The cameolike silhouettes are of Washington, Lincoln, Kennedy, an anonymous young woman, a girl and a boy back to back and a couple of animals. These are rendered in different sizes from sheet to sheet, but in no apparent scalar relation to one another. Levine could be working out the permutations of pairings and sizes, but the selection of thirty-six here seems entirely random, and her motive for doing what she is doing — why she has chosen these images, neutral and provocative at once — remains mysterious.

Of all the works in *Pictures*, Troy Brauntuch's photographic transfer prints bear the least readily connotative images, but the ones with the most intense significance when identified — when their original context is reintroduced. Often Brauntuch operates on a level of pure poetic opacity. In *Golden Distance* a Chromolin proof of the back of a woman's head is rendered twice; over the second is the phrase, "whispers around a woman." This might suggest talking about the woman behind her back — if it were merely the one image with the phrase that constituted the work. But why two images, and only one phrase? The "whispers" become whispers other than one's own, "around" becomes a physical rather than a psychological space, and "woman" becomes at once more and less specific than that depicted object of gossip. 1 2 3 seems only an elegant exercise in the visual isolation of three odd, but not particularly remarkable, images reproduced on deep-colored ground — until one finds out that the images are drawings by Adolf Hitler. At that point the connotative "image" of Hitler, with all its implications becomes the subject of 1 2 3. Thus Brauntuch demonstrates the



ROBERT LONGO: SEVEN SEALS FOR MISSOURI BREAKS, SILVER SCENE: "LET'S GO TO THE HILLS AND JOIN THE GUERRILLAS," 1977, enamel on cast aluminum, 60"x 84", at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.

absolute amorality of imagery — or, rather, that the morality associated with imagery is a function of automatic interpretation prompted by acculturation.

Philip Smith is the one artist participating in *Pictures* who has not yet resolved his means, although his message is clear enough. Smith's huge (eight-foot-high) painting-drawings on paper mounted directly on the wall are crammed with figures and objects aligned unevenly and rendered as faint outlines on white. These are made more vivid by the black field in each work surrounding the white patches. There are also occasional licks of color. In effect Smith shows that visual context determines the nature of an image's impact, just as narrative context determines its "message." Unfortunately, his harsh treatment of his images — the crude, tracelike outlines, the messy, cluttered presentation — robs them of most of their potential force. Smith has broken down the hierarchy of images, but at the needless expense of clarity and emphasis. □

Peter Frank writes for Art in America, Village Voice and other publications.



SHERRIE LEVINE: SONS AND LOVERS, one of thirty-six panels, fluorescent tempera on graph paper, 22"x 28", at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. Photo: D. James Dee.