

# Artists Space

COMMITTEE FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC.  
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## "Pictures" at Artists Space

Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith exhibited together in a show selected by Douglas Crimp. "Pictures" was a well thought out presentation of recent tendencies away from abstraction and back toward problems of representation. Crimp also provided a thoughtful text.

Rejecting the styles and tactics of formalist modernism, these five artists, like growing numbers of their contemporaries, are looking with renewed interest at that other tradition, stretching from Symbolism through Surrealism, in which the work of art is structured around an understanding of psychology. Instead of relying upon references to the conventions of modernist art, these young artists seek their authority in a wide range of conventions stemming from film and television. They borrow images and procedures from these mediums as material for their own investigations of our confused understanding of what a picture is.

Brauntuch and Goldstein both use the inscrutability of the photograph as a starting point. There was the most accessible work in the show (perhaps because it inevitably made one think of Baldessari). Brauntuch elegantly explores the ambiguity of the caption in his work. Most of his pieces bear a deliberately mystifying inscription, but in his largest work here, the caption is missing. Simply titled 123, it is a set of three silk-screen prints, each carrying a reproduction of a nondescript drawing set against a blood-red ground. The missing information is that the drawings were made by Hitler (which we learn from Crimp's text). But this is no explanation, and all that is left is the odd sensuousness of the piece.

Goldstein's work demonstrates the way in which a lack of contextual clues can deprive an image of specific meaning, but not of a more generalized one. *The Pull* consists of three large photographs, probably from a magazine and considerably

transformed by the artist, each showing a tiny figure floating in a large field of pale color. It is impossible to identify the figures without close inspection, but one immediately knows that they are floating or falling. How? Not from lived experience, but from the remembered experience of photo and television documentaries.

Levine and Smith both explore the connections and disconnections among sequences of images. Levine's huge *Sons and Lovers*, 36 separate drawings on graph paper, might be characterized as a comic-book soap opera with no text. On each sheet, two silhouetted heads painted in fluorescent tempera confront one another and as our eye moves along, some sort of melodrama is enacted by the "cast"—Washington, Lincoln, Kennedy, an anonymous woman, a couple and a dog—but what happens remains obscure.

Smith's work also confounds one's expectations of intelligible narrative, but uses a more personal idiom. His paintings, on unstretched canvas, are covered with schematically rendered images based on photos, reproductions and personal fantasy. These pictures are given equal importance to each other as they float over the dense black ground. This, along with the idiosyncratic ordering of the images, recalls the irrationality but not the intensity of dream.

Having understood that the fundamental condition of the photograph is that it freezes time and so makes it appear possible to possess the moment, Longo took the step of solidifying his photo-derived images into three-dimensional reliefs. In one piece, based, like all his work, on a movie still, a figure has been isolated from any surroundings and attached directly to the wall. A man in shirt-sleeves and striped necktie arches gracefully through space, apparently shot from behind. Everything is in limbo. The work hangs there in its ambivalent space, neither painting nor sculpture, holding the image of a man suspended between life and death. This piece, *The American Soldier and the Quiet Schoolboy*, was the most stimulating in an immensely refreshing show. —Thomas Lawson



Robert Longo *The American Soldier and the Quiet Schoolboy*, 1977 aluminum, 25 inches high, in "Pictures" at Artists Space.

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P. 118