PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW/Vicki Goldberg

How to Warm a Post-Modernist's Heart

PORTLAND, Ore.

A STORY, PERHAPS APOCRYPHAL, is told about Picasso at the end of World War II. An American G.I. complained to the artist that he could not understand why he painted women with their eyes going off in one direction and their noses in another. "Because that's the way I see them," said the painter, who then asked whether the soldier had a photograph of his girlfriend. He did. Picasso looked at it. "You like her so small?" he said.

The camera is such an efficient means of identification — where would passports and drivers' licenses and wanted posters be without it? — that its built-in distortions are seldom remarked. But once artists began raising questions about the conventions of photographic representation and the rumor went abroad that reality had been replaced by images, photographers were soon merrily subverting the accepted codes of identification. It would warm the heart of any good post-modernist to derail the camera's potential for re-presentation, and many do.

"The Surrogate Figure: Intercepted Identities in Contemporary Photography," at Reed College in Portland, Ore., through March 15, scans the issue via six photographers. (The show began at and was organized by the Center for Photography at Woodstock, N.Y.)

This is a small show trying to tackle a big subject with some relatively unknown photographers. Like many a concept show, it is a bit headier to think about than to look at, but it has some engaging images and it hints that, despite repeated obituaries, post-modernism is alive and well and has worked itself into the fabric of society. Some photographers just figure that things are seldom what they seem or exactly as the camera shows them — and so does much of the world today, as the reactions to Oliver Stone's new film, "J.F.K.," make clear.

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The show's title is deceptive; not all these photographs deal with surrogate figures (or maybe they do, photographs being by nature surrogates for the people and objects they portray). Intercepted, altered or obstructed identities predominate; Julia Ballerini, guest curator, focuses on them in the catalogue.

Appropriation naturally plays a role. Lorna Bieber uses stock photographs but daubs the faces white as clowns', with smeary lips and Little Orphan Annie eyes. She gives Renaissance art an equal opportunity. In a piece called "Altar," God the Father and angels, possibly by Raphael, preside over a new holy image: a photograph of a woman clutching a cowboy by his shirt. Everyone has a smile face that does not smile. This charming picture may be too lightweight to carry the suggestion that some B-movie image of women and men is the current idea of an icon. But the play between Old Master art, new-schlock photography and purposefully "bad" painting is a nice tease.

Bill Barrette, too, starts in the museum, taking a photograph of a Hellenistic sculpture, then complicating the view of it with an overlay of tiny grids — rather like the screens that break down photographs into dots for halftone reproduction — then adding lenses that alter the image each time the viewer moves.

Barrette's assemblages calmly pose a challenge: how much has the lens itself changed the way the world regards art? Immeasurably, of course. The museum without walls was built by the camera, and most art is known primarily through replicas not much bigger or much more *like* than the picture a G.I. carries of his girlfriend.

A photograph of a painted or carved figure is a surrogate of a surrogate. Richard Ross also treats the Old Masters, with blurred and scarcely identifiable details from paintings and bodies, pretty if not overly profound comments on the voyeurism implicit in the love of art. (Photographers are nearly obsessed with art these days. Artists had all those centuries to play with representation, leaving so little space for originality here and now.)

Laurie Simmons, something of a pioneer on the surrogate-figure scene, shows photographs of ventriloquists' dummies. Whatever invention these "portraits" have is due to the choice of subject: the approximate identity, the altered ego, inheres in the doll, and the photograph merely points it out. Still, it's worth considering that we live in a culture of talking heads.

Far more bizarre are Susan Wides's pictures of famous folk like Fred and Ginger or Shirley Temple replicated in three dimensions. Picasso, looking pretty much like himself, stands next to two stubby, three-dimensional nudes that have somehow stepped out of one of his 1906 paintings. Does he like them so three-dimensional?

The lighting is odd, and if you didn't know that the setting was a wax museum — hallowed hall of kitsch, idolatry and slightly creepy likenesses — you could think this was the real Picasso (whatever that is) and be baffled to find him with these Jeff Koons versions of his art. This image illustrates an unsuspected complexity of wax museums: if Picasso is modeled on a photograph and the nudes on a painting, which is more real, which more fake?

These are surrogate figures with a vengeance. Similar toys and dummies have been in vogue among photographers since the 70's: David Levinthal's toy German army moved on Europe; Ellen Brooks's little figures made love where they weren't supposed to; Bernard Faucon's artificial children mingled with real ones. Toys and wax figures are perfectly credible surrogates in a society that feels itself removed from its own experience.

Of the six photographers in this show, only one uses pictures of what might be called, for want of a better phrase, actual people. Darrel Ellis projects family photographs his father took (a special category of appropriation) onto molded and cut-out plaster forms, creating breaks, blanks, repeats and slippages; he then re-photographs the images. Faces are replaced by irregular white patches, limbs are doubled, heads slip down into the torso. (*There's* an identity problem for you.)

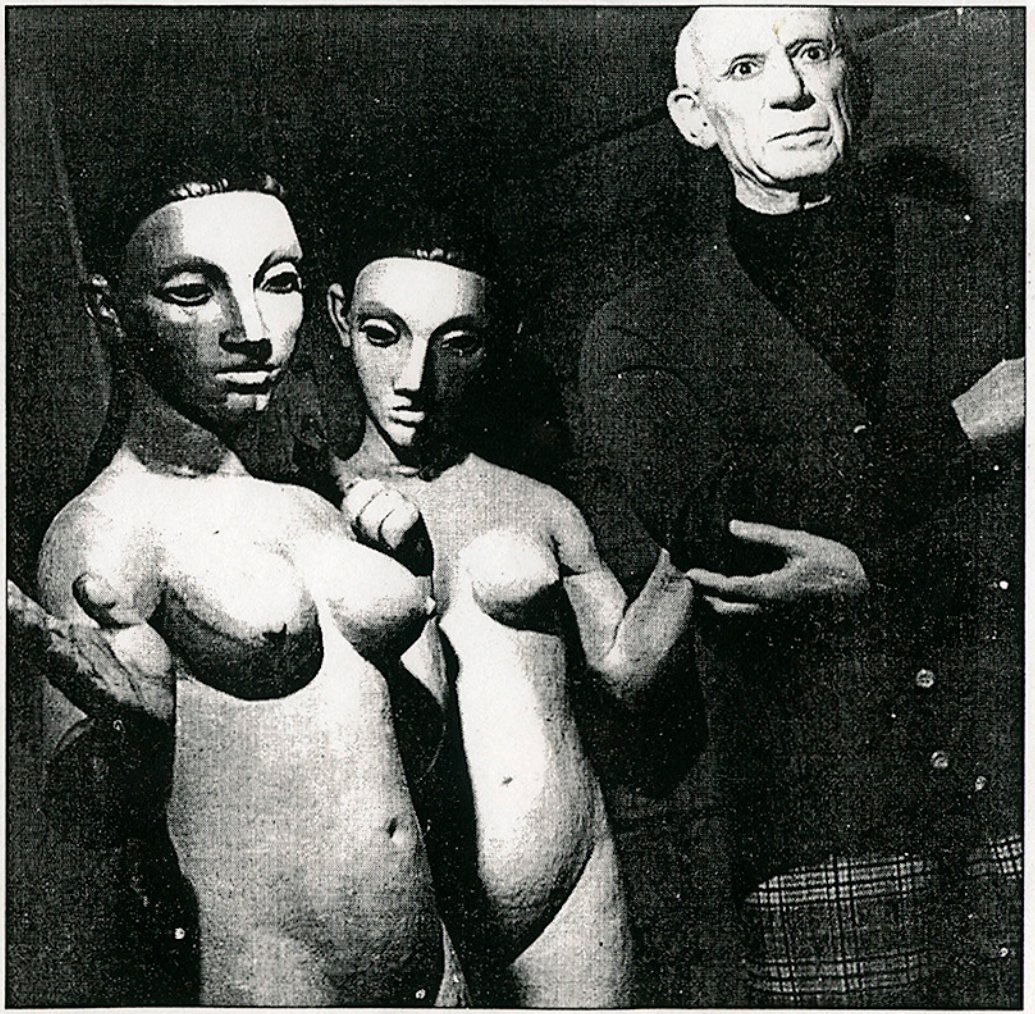
Subverting the camera's power to identify can be fun. A show in Oregon explores some ways of doing it.

Because these people are a family, not waxworks, and because they are black, the photographs refer to a patently emotional level of identity, what Ellis describes as "this ideal black family life along with all these disjunctions and holes."

That's one kind of identity crisis. When Picasso first dislocated the human face and body, the images were disturbing because they discredited the idea that humanity was made in God's image; also, the artist clearly judged bodily perfection less important than his own perceptions. When photographers today question conventional representation, they point to confusions in the culture.

The whole world has an identity crisis of fairly rollicking proportions if you believe, as strict post-modernists do, that there is no final reality out there, that reality and identity consist of and are apprehended by representations alone. On a more local level, male and female, black and white, ethnic and national identities are currently under siege. Madonna presents herself with exaggerated breasts peeking through a man's suit; Michael Jackson remakes his features and his image to blur the line between genders and races.

Not many weeks ago, representation and identity became a national issue when Patricia Bowman appeared on television as a blue blob during the William Kennedy Smith rape trial. Afterward, she chose to appear unmasked, yet the image that will be remembered far longer than her features is that vision of radically intercepted identity, a grotesque surrogate without a face. □



Center for Photography, Woodstock

"Masterpiece Theater" by Susan Wides—The wax Picasso is modeled on a photograph, the nudes on a painting.

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