

# the Stranger

**OH MY GOD!**  
LOCAL PSYCHOPATHS  
PLOT TO BLOW UP  
KINGDOME **E7**

FREE EVERY THURSDAY • VOL.9, NO.27 • MARCH 23-29 • A TASTY ALTERNATIVE TO MASHED

POTATOES



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# Irrational Exuberance

ART

## Friese Undine Seeks out the Dissonant Notes by Eric Fredericksen

FRIESE UNDINE did himself and his art a big favor by moving to Chicago a year and a half ago. Undine is an anachronistic fellow, favoring slicked-back hair and vintage clothes. His signature painting style of nicotine-stained white over a solid black background has a certain sepia-toned feel, and his characters and settings tended toward mid-century styles in dress, hair, and architecture.

Having moved to a city where America's past is always present, Undine's been able to surround himself with the kind of atmosphere he sought to create in his paintings, an atmosphere sorely lacking in Seattle. As a result, the hold of the past on his art has loosened, and Undine has taken a new interest in the here and now. This has had little detrimental effect on his work, and has allowed his always-rich ideas to gain immediacy.

Undine's main format, for years, has been a single-image painting with a caption underneath. His text/image juxtapositions have always been clever; seemingly unrelated and yet completely apt, as in a boxer taking a left hook to the head with a caption reading "And now his eyes are opened." Unfortunately, in the past, those captions tended to be written in German, an unexplained quirk that meant non-German-reading gallerygoers had to scrutinize the wall label's translation to understand the juxtaposition. Undine moved away from German in his show at Traver last year, but his format for that show involved "illustrating" Bible verses: The book, chapter, and verse citations appeared at the bottom of the painting, but the text of the verse in question appeared only on the wall label, so comprehension still required the left-right/painting-label head fake of his German-captioned works.

In this show, Undine's jettisoned his reliance on secondary materials. His captions are in English, are on the painting itself, and are now more fully integrated into the composition. Undine has drawn inspiration from the tropes of propaganda posters, and his text/image combinations now boast the grace of a V. V. Mayakovsky poster. Their politics, as you might guess, are a bit more cryptic than Mayakovsky's: A horse, its ass toward us, is captioned "When it paused and turned, we thought that we saw an expression of regret"; a woman whispering in the ear of a boy sitting on a steamer trunk bears the caption "In Praise of Brand X"; a girl riding a hobbyhorse in front of a stage-set Western town that has a saloon and a bank and little else, is captioned "Even the lawless have somewhat limited choices."

Since 1998, Undine has been working on a comprehensive survey of the world's powerful people, under the title *Take off the Head*. He describes his small paintings—now numbering 555 separate images—as portraits of politicians, but his definition is a broad one. The faces include the leaders of any obscure country you might name, along

with a broader swath of politicians from North America and Europe; but they also include corporate CEOs, criminals, TV news anchors and pundits, and everyday people who somehow got caught up in political issues—Paula Corbin Jones, Elian Gonzalez, Jack Kevorkian. These aren't politicians, but Undine's work argues that they are participants in the political world, willingly or otherwise.

The portraits are beautifully observed, carefully capturing Bill Bradley's tumor-like neck, William F. Buckley Jr.'s papery skin, and Hillary Clinton's glaring eyes. But they're not catalogs of physical im-

**Friese Undine**  
The Party  
William Traver Gallery,  
110 Union St., Second  
Floor, 587-6501,  
through April 2



FRIESE FRAME Undine's cryptic politics.

perfections. Even as the individual portraits evince a subjective, appraising eye, the 555 portraits taken together acquire the status of an objective catalog.

# New Developments

ART

## Photo Facts and Fictions by Emily Hall

AFTER 150 YEARS, photography remains the most vexing of media. In no other art is the viewer so trapped in the gap between reality and representation.

The critic John Berger wrote, "All photographs have the status of fact. What is to be examined is in what way photography can and cannot give meaning to facts." In some photographs, the facts are as elusive as they are in a minimalist painting. This is quite clear in this month's fine exhibition at Eyre/Moore Gallery, *Self/Developed*. The show's premise is rather loose: five artists who use photographs of themselves in their work. The result, far from any kind of portrait-gallery feeling, is a set of (pleasantly) uneasy juxtapositions of photography and self as vehicles for meaning.

A photograph by Enrique Martinez Celaya, a Cuban-born artist now living in California, seems to deny the very possibility of self-portrait. It is a standard shot of a man on a beach in which the figure has been carefully and completely inked over, a move that both protects its privacy and frustrates the viewer. Liza Ryan's small, multi-paneled *Wind Study* alternates images of windblown hair over eyes (presumably Ryan's) and trees. Ryan's work exploits one of photography's great cognitive dissonances: the depiction in present time of something that is already over, already lost. Her work affects on a low wavelength; it's not the most visually startling in the exhibition, but it returns to haunt later.

A photographer I know told me re-

cently that a photographed landscape reveals the space inside the artist. Actually, all art, to some degree, hints at what is inside the artist. But this truism makes interpretation of Alice Wheeler's exhibition of color photographs at Greg Kucera Gallery somewhat problematic. Best known for her documentation of the early '90s grunge scene, Wheeler has turned to landscape, in her words, as "respite from the 'hipster' scene," and as a "search for my roots." And they are good photographs—

vivid, striking—but they tell me things I certainly know already. There is a lot of contrasting of the old and new West, a theme that has been well-covered by other photographers. The best images occur when people find their way into the landscapes, such as a small head bobbing in a pool, or two boys watching fireworks in Neah Bay where they seem to have been blown over by the spectacle above them. A photograph of a ski-masked magician lighting himself on fire is one of the most arresting in the exhibition, and speaks to the hold that Wheeler's former material still has on her.

On the other hand, Amir Zaki's photographs at James Harris Gallery indicate a quite determined sensibility. Zaki trains his focus on Los Angeles at night. He takes his photographs from the tops of buildings, looking down into alleys and deserted parking lots, using the artificial lights that populate the darkness as his only light source. Looking at his images reminds one of how the eyes adjust to the dark: First the surface is simply broad and dim, and

Undine's survey is fascinating, systematic, unfinished, important, vacant. We meet Nana Kwaku Dua, the cataract-eyed leader of the Ghanain Ashanti; Johnny and Luther Htoo, the 12-year-old leaders of God's Army in Myanmar; Shoko Ashahara of Japan's Aum Shinrikyo cult; and Pnina Rosenblum, the Israeli model who heads a political party named after her—fascinatingly odd people from around the world. We also re-encounter Kipland Kinkel of Springfield, Oregon, Ted Kaczynski of Montana, and John William King of Texas—disturbing creations of our own society. In Undine's neatly organized card catalog sitting on a pedestal next to the portraits, these people are coolly appraised, their salient career-features noted on a card and filed away for future reference alongside those of the American presidential candidates. The piece is information-stuffed and yet almost useless; it tries to understand the world in a comprehensive manner and brilliantly documents its inability to do so. It's simply great. ■

then details begin to emerge, single moments of particular intensity like a window lighted at basement level, a lone TV satellite dish on a vast empty roof, or a plastic bag languishing in a gutter. His long exposures reveal, on close inspection, the lights of cars that have gone by, like delicate brushwork on the empty streets.

Zaki manipulates the images digitally to restore some of the colors that would be lost in the darkness, and this gives a feeling of recovery to the works—of ghostly things taking their rightful place on the retina. The photographs have a magnificent matte quality and flatness. At the same time that the artist uses the most modern software and printing techniques, he declines the glossiness and depth that are among photography's best mimetic qualities. There is a vertiginous feeling that permeates the exhibition, a bit of Gotham in a city associated with broad Southern California light. There is a truth to it, but it is a truth manufactured to suit the artist's vision.

Which, come to think of it, you can say about any thoughtful work of art. ■



LONELY VERTIGO Zaki's L.A. parking lot.