

Alternatives to Photography

A Discussion of the Art of Barbara Astman and Fern Helfand

by Judy Wright

Photography is an extension and expansion of personal perceptions. It is a way of seeing. The power of photography to alter perception is dependent upon the ability of the artists involved to push and change the definitional boundaries of photography itself. Fern Helfand and Barbara Astman are two Toronto artists attempting such change through the integration in their work of photography, sculpture, painting and textile arts.

Although differing immensely in style and technique, both artists are concerned with altering the photographic image by placing it in a new context. For **Barbara Astman**, a recent graduate of the Ontario College of Art, this has entailed an intense and delightful application to her work of techniques learned from a classical fine arts background. "I feel I have pulled everything I have learned in every other area — with painting, with textiles, with sculpture — right together. I get to do all the things that I wanted to do in these other areas, and with photography, I can make it more intimate." In the exploration of the new medium, Astman has found the freedom to approach her work in a more personal and hence more satisfactory manner.

After graduating from Rochester Institute of Technology, School for American Craftsmen, in 1970, with an Associates Degree in Silver-smithing, Astman studied sculpture at O.C.A. for one year.* Frustrated by the impersonal objects she was

creating, she turned to photography and textile arts in 1971.

Her direct involvement with photography began with a third-hand camera purchased from a friend. She produced thousands of prints documenting her life, herself, her friends, and their activities.

One of her first ventures into alternate photography consisted of a series of six cut-out black and white photographs of a lovely and contented cow, encased in vinyl and surrounded by brightly coloured flower decals. The work folds up neatly in accordion style and may be exhibited against varying backgrounds.

From this point Astman began to alter the image more directly through hand-tinting of the image, by working more extensively with other materials such as lace and corduroy, by quilting some works, and by printing directly onto photo-sensitized linen and canvas. In one of her most successful wall pieces, entitled *Carol Performing Lilac Tricks* (1974), a hand-tinted photograph of her sister stares challengingly from the centre of a mass of lilacs (of the sort little old ladies pin onto their hats), surrounded by mauve satin and accented by black lace.

In another, *Gayle in New York* (1974), two fragile hand-tinted portraits printed directly onto linen are framed by heavy off-white lace. The careful balance reflects Astman's extensive design training. The sense of nostalgia evident in this piece is familiar throughout Astman's art work. The

pastel tinting, the lace, and the cherub decals are all reminders of past times — gentler and slower times.

When combined with the subject matter, which is always either a self-portrait, friends, or family, the nostalgic element becomes a comment on friendships and the repetition of time. The photographic and textural qualities give rise not only to a realization of the historical aspect of friendships, but also a slight longing for the time when mobility was less, and friendships were closer by virtue of a stronger community sense. It expresses the kind of empty feeling one gets after staring at an old photo of your great grandmother — overclothed, stiff, proper and stable. The combination of the modern, instant photograph and the soft, essentially timeless lace is jarring. It is unsettling because it emphasizes the feeling that something has slipped by — unnoticed until that moment. At the same time, it is strangely settling in the assurance it offers, by its very presence, that yes, indeed, other, stabler times have been.

It is perhaps inevitable that a work of art integrating traditional and experimental elements should elicit this ambiguous emotional response. It is a reflection. However, for Astman this nostalgia is not so much pathos as celebration. There is too much joy and energy in her work to allow nostalgia to be a negative force. For it is through this element that her art entertains and involves people in some-



1. *Looking Into the Past*/photo ceramic/Fern Helfand
2. Barbara Astman

thing they think is familiar. There *is* such a response to Astman's work precisely for this reason — it is familiar. Everyone has a family album, and everyone recognizes the fun of them. Thus Astman appreciates and utilizes successfully a basic photographic characteristic or quality — its immediate accessibility by people through the directness of its image.

An appreciation for this same quality is exhibited in **Fern Helfand's** art currently showing at the Baldwin St. Gallery of Photography, Sept. 2 to Sept. 30. In this exhibition, entitled "Directions in Photographic Sculpture", Helfand displays a keen wit and an ability to turn the so easily accepted "realism" of summer vacation photography into a mocking illusion.

Helfand, who has worked closely with Jack Dale and David Gilhooly at York University, is preoccupied with photosensitizing different materials and printing directly onto these. *Summer*, one of her earliest attempts is a photograph of her foot intruding into a patch of clover, printed onto a pool of material. The irregular shape of the piece destroys the framing patterns of traditional photography. A further dimension is added when the work is re-photographed against a background of real grass.

Prior to her involvement in photography, Helfand worked extensively in clay sculpture, creating among other things, visually humorous connections between the Canadian Tire Corporation and Canadian

masculinity. More importantly, however, she began to explore the contradictions inherent in soft interior/hard exterior — that is, the illusion offered by the surface reality of a person or thing. Because photography is exceptionally suited for such a study, Helfand began to incorporate it into her sculpture. *Victory Burlesque* is one of her most ambitious attempts.

In this work a balance is struck between the bright plastic colours of the clay replica of the Victory — a legendary Toronto burlesque house — and the fading photographs of the actual marquee and billboard pin-ups printed onto the sculpture. The come-on is better than the show. The offerings inside aren't as brittle or exotic as the flashy mock-up building would lead you to believe. This interior/exterior motif occurs in *Starvin' Marvin's*, *Le Strip*, and *Game Land*, all of which are familiar sights on the Toronto Yonge St. "strip". Through her use of colours, slick textures and low contrast photographs, Helfand has re-created the actuality versus desire/dream dichotomy inherent in the nature of strip joints and burlesque houses.

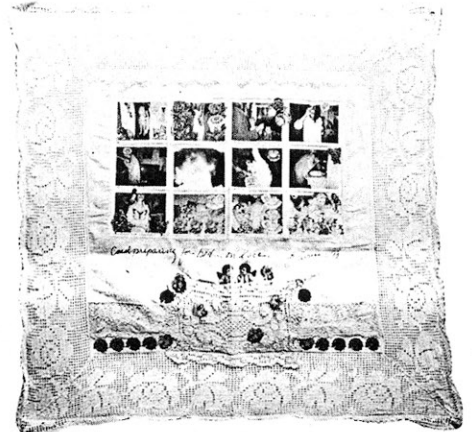
In *Looking Into the Past*, Helfand, like Astman, uses the power of the photographic image to evoke a strong sense of memory. In this piece her grandparents and their family look out from behind a heavy clay window frame, through bits of broken glass. One of Helfand's most sensitive works, this is not a celebration of

past time, but rather a statement on the strictures of it.

The uniqueness, perhaps novelty of Barbara Astman's and Fern Helfand's art is derived from their individual attempts to integrate photography with the more traditional art forms in which they have been trained. For this reason their work defied conventional labels and categorization. As Barbara Astman stated in a recent interview, "It's hard to put a label on what I'm doing and what I am right now. But that doesn't bother me because that's part of pulling it all together, just leading a creative existence and doing the work that pleases me most of all."

The results of this integrating process are self-evident. By taking these exploratory steps, these two artists have not only broadened their personal visions and artistic scope, but the viewers' as well.

* Astman graduated from O.C.A. in 1973, winner of a W. O. Forsyth Award. Her photographs have been published in *Impressions*, *Artscanada* and *Image Nation* #15. Included among her list of exhibitions is a one-woman show at the Baldwin St. Gallery of Photography and the O.C.A. exhibition selected by the Pollack Gallery in June of this year. As well, her work has been purchased by the National Film Board, and the External Affairs Dept. In May of 1974 she was awarded a grant from the Province of Ontario Council for the Arts.



1. Carol Performing Lilac Tricks 1974/Barbara Astman
2. Fern Helfand
3. Barbara Astman