

# Photography

## The impure narratives of Barbara Astman

by Gary Michael Dault

**B**arbara Astman does things with photographs that drive purists crazy. She uses colour xerography, for example, and now instant colour cameras. She hand-tints her images. She combines them with words. She has her pictures commercially enlarged, preferring to "accept the responsibility" for being a sort of still-photography *director*, rather than slaving over a hot colour enlarger the way she's expected to. All in all, Barbara Astman is, at twenty-seven, a rebel of accelerating importance in Canadian art.

Astman's procedural philosophy is simple. "I just do whatever I have to do to get the image the way I want it," she says. "In that regard, I'm really lucky I trained as a designer rather than as a pure photographer. I think of myself as an artist who happens to use photography as an important ingredient in my work. What I make really," Astman says, "is something perhaps better referred to as 'camera art' rather than photography."

The work for which Astman became known in art circles during the last few years consisted of hand-tinted colour-Xerox prints in series of friends and family set unmoving and stolid against wittily varying backgrounds. I remember a "portrait" of painter David Craven, for example, that posed an austere and judgemental Craven against a whole parade of other people's paintings—all of the backgrounds and all of the "Cravens" having been carefully (and very "unpurely") colour-keyed (Astman's word is "camouflaged") so that Craven and, say, Van Gogh's sunflowers seemed logically and emotionally matched. The painter seemed to have become what he beheld, and vice versa.

Now Astman is working on a long series of what she calls "visual narratives." One of them, a portrait of Astman herself, appears here.

**T**he new work is a direct outcropping of Astman's playful, sometimes rather childlike, explorations of new methods of image-making. "I bought a Polaroid SX-70 camera in January and it changed my life," Astman told me. "I know many other artists don't approve of my attitude, but I like modern technology. I like to get my ideas across fast. I even like depending on the technical expertise of other people to get my ideas out.

"I guess what I'm saying is that I like what are called *support systems*," Astman says, with the sort of half-guilty smile she reserves for moments when she knows she's talking like *Artforum*. "When I was making photographs the usual way, I liked being able to call on a good printer. I liked hanging over his shoulder and telling him to burn in a little more *here*, a little less *there*. I was the *auteur*. I can print well, but why should I take the time to?"

And so Astman came to the SX-70. But not without modifications. "I had to do colour work," Astman says. "I got tired of black and white. But I have a lot of hangups about colour. The main difficulty lies in the fact that commercial colour is impersonal and essentially uncontrollable. I like the SX-70's speed. But I had to find a way somehow to make its colour *my* colour.

"When you shoot a pack of SX-70 film," says Astman, "you find that each pack has its own unique colour balance—which is putting it as charitably as I can. The wallpaper in the series of photos of me, for example, is a good deal *greener* than SX-70 film could make it. That's because I've had to alter the film's colour balance myself. I've done that in two ways. First, I've had the SX-70 prints colour photostatted and enlarged slightly (some are *eventually* to be four feet by five feet). And then I've hand-tinted parts of each print—to create a harmonious all-over colour that would be otherwise impossible to achieve.

"For me, the true mechanical colour of the world is a sort of tyrannical lack of expressiveness. When I take an SX-70 photo, its colour is hot and highly specific. But when I have the picture photostatted, the stat process tends to generalize the colours—giving them a neutrality that I can then begin to work on. I use those old-fashioned

photographic oil colours that come in little plastic capsules. They've been around for about thirty years. I really love the way each capsule is helpfully labelled 'flesh,' 'lips,' 'cheek'—that sort of thing. And then I alter the colour tones and densities in certain areas of the photographs—to bring up contrast, to 'key' the photo to an all-over colour system—to make each work curiously 'unreal' and personal to me." The accompanying series, for example, is keyed to black and green—with Astman's normally bright chestnut hair tinted a velvety Victorian black.

**I**f tinting photographs is unnatural and an offence to photographic purists, so is Astman's way of studiously posing, and generally rendering as artificial as she can, the people and the settings she intends to use.

"I don't shoot 100 pictures to get a winner," Astman says. "Anybody can do that. I pose. I arrange. I even run *tests* to see how the final shooting will look. I sit and talk with each of my subjects about what I want (notice how filmic all this is), and what they want, and then we start. I take just a few pictures. Just the ones I know I want. With 35mm film, the whole process is distant and unrelated to my subjects at all. With the SX-70, on the other hand, the pictures are popping out all the time. The subject and I can sit down together and decide what to keep, what to discard. I allow my models much more freedom now than I used to."

Astman's resulting visual narratives have a haunting quality that takes them more effectively than would seem possible beyond one's initial feeling that these photos are free-floating bits of narcissism moving to the accompaniment of a soundtrack from daytime TV. There's the gorgeous, subtle colouring of course. But there's more. Astman's language—less than poetry and more than psychobabble—is kept essentially "normal," abstract, a little less pointed than a journal, and less specific than real captions would be. The result is generalized language. Language that is keyed in tone, "tuned" in fact, the way the photographs are keyed to a certain system of colour. "The prose, as banal as it is," Astman says, "begins to assume power over the images. The prose may not be helpful *in itself* but it soon begins to *help you see what you're seeing*." ◉



she told him she was uncomfortable  
with herself



and she was uncomfortable around her  
friends too



he asked if she was uncomfortable  
around him



she felt uncomfortable around him



he knew, but he let her answer slip  
away



she pretended to not notice.