

Barbara Astman

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With consummate skill Barbara Astman explores portraiture through a timely combination of technology and conceptual matter. In her most recent self-portraits exhibited at The Sable-Castelli Gallery, Astman discloses mastery in the use of a Polaroid SX70 instant color camera which has allowed her total concentration on the perfection of color and the creation of impressions.

The artist begins with a color photograph of herself, made possible by equipping her Polaroid camera with a timer. Upon receiving the photo from the camera she immediately types onto its surface a quick, spontaneous letter to a friend, the type engraving itself into the wet, pliable plastic. The Polaroid snapshot is then rephotographed in order to acquire a 4 by 5-inch color negative, which is in turn blown up to a life-size photomural at a commercial processing house.

Astman plans in advance the range and balance of color in each work. The "color-fields" of the images are composed of the artist herself, usually dressed in a uniform of dark T-shirt and jeans, posing in front of a vibrant, vat-dyed cloth which appears against a black background. For an added touch of color the figure in each photograph holds a personal symbol in hand – a silver spoon, a blue cup, a red pencil – simple objects that were lying around in the studio.

Detail is carefully avoided in these compositions, and perhaps it is this lack of specificity that gives these photo-images their haunting, lasting quality. With fragile shadings and artful exaggerations of blues and reds they flash before the observer, evoking one individual's thoughts and impressions of friends and acquaintances. The messages inscribed in faint type on each photograph, to Patti, Gray, Karyn, Harvey, could be anyone's; "dear david i wondered why you never phoned last week as you said you would...", or "dear sheila i was thinking about you and wondering if you remember the day you walked in on me..."

The visual and written images combine to yield a mysterious gossamer quality in the works, creating a vast well of mood which evokes reflection and insight. Astman's portraits are striking in color, and contain a glowing translucence in a Pop art manner suggestive of Warhol. They are incredibly real one instant and fantastically shadowy another.

