

## ART

RON BULL/TORONTO STAR

# Barbara's blow-up . . .

## How a camera, a pose and a typed letter to a friend can become things of beauty

By Gary Michael Dault

Artist Barbara Astman wields machinery with the same ease and authority others use tubes of paint and brushes.

A pioneer of color Xeroxing as an artistic medium (she still runs a weekly seminar on the subject for Visual Arts Ontario), Astman has insisted all her career on the poetic use of the toys of our technological times.

For her latest exhibition, for example, now at the Sable-Castelli Gallery, she has pushed her Polaroid SX-70 Sonar camera absolutely to its esthetic breaking point — with spectacular results.

"This is the least technical show I've done in a long time," Astman admits. "I've tried to simplify the work so that it doesn't take me a couple of years to figure out how to do it."

But then simple for Astman isn't simple for the rest of us. Briefly, this is what she's done: Her new work begins life as a Polaroid color photo of Astman herself. Her camera is equipped with a timer so that once she decides how she's going to pose herself, she trips the shutter and has 13 seconds to get into position.

After the camera hands her the photo of herself, she runs to her electric typewriter and types a newsy, sort of bread-and-butter letter to a friend onto the surface of the photograph. At this point the SX-70 photograph is still wet and pliable. She has about two minutes at the typewriter before the photo's emulsion hardens and sets.

"What really happens," she says, "is that the force of the typewriter keys hitting the soft wet plastic photograph tends to emboss — or engrave — the letters right into the emulsion."

### Glowing paintings

The next step is to have the Polaroid itself re-photographed. She has a 4 by 5-inch color negative made from her Polaroid original — and then has that negative printed into a huge, mural-like, life-size color photograph — the photographs that make up the current show.

Now the result of all this is a whole lot more than just big color photographs. For one thing, the resulting photo-murals are so richly colored they seem much more like big glowing paintings than anything else. Their splendid jewel-like color is the result both of Astman's careful supervision of the color-enlargement process ("It's really hard to make a good deep red photograph as a good deep red," Astman says) and also the fact that she has so carefully built color excitement into each picture.

"Before I began to make these photographs I went out and bought myself over a hundred pieces of differently colored fabric. I spread them out all over my studio floor. I had big walls of solid black

cloth pinned up everywhere and I 'practised' by making hundreds of photographs of these pieces of colored cloth hung up in front of the black backgrounds. It wasn't until I found exactly the color combinations I liked the best that I decided what 'uniform' I would wear (black jeans, turquoise pants, etc.) and how I would arrange myself against the colored cloths."

She then adds one more touch of color by holding an object in her hand — a different object in each photograph. These objects are just simple things she has lying about the studio ("my favorite red pencil, my blue cup, a silver spoon, a blue light bulb . . ."), their only common quality being their simplicity, their lack of pattern. Their lack of specificity, in other words.

The texts on each photograph? Well, like the generalized, unspecific objects she holds in her hand, these brief so-called "letters" to friends are in fact studies in the quick impressions of people that the unrehearsed memory brings immediately to mind.

### Balletic abandon

As far as Astman is concerned, while these letters are, admittedly, addressed to her own friends, they are the sort of things anyone would say to anyone.

Each begins "Dear Patti, I've been thinking about you . . ." or "Dear David, it seems like a long time since . . ." Stuff like that. "These are actually quite universal messages," Astman says. "We all have things to say to somebody else. They're all the same things, too."

All of her people — Karyn, Ralph, Patti, Jared, Harvey, Gray, Arnaud — are, according to Astman, people who have been of personal importance in her life. In the privacy of her own studio, she thinks about them, poses for their photograph of her, bashes out her message to them — sometimes dancing around the place in balletic abandon and shouting as she frantically types on the hardening photograph. But all this is private. "It's like private-performance art," Astman says.



Barbara Astman and her work: 'The force of the typewriter keys hitting the soft photograph engraves the letters into the emulsion.'

"It's important to me but nobody could ever see me do it."

And then later in the gallery, the transformation. Big opulent Titian-like portraits. An anonymous, nameless woman, holding a simple generalized object, posed against a rich backdrop of cloth. And over her image — floating in what looks like

pools of fluid color — the huge enlarged typewritten characters with their touching and timeless messages: "Dear Harvey, I was thinking about you and imagined you have not thought of me in over ten years . . ."

□ The Sable-Castelli Gallery, 33 Hazelton Ave., Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. 961-0011.