

Art is red, black and fine

Photographer mixes self portrait with kitchen tools

By Lisa Balfour Bowen
Toronto Star art critic

An absolutely stunning exhibition of red and black murals by photographer Barbara Astman opened yesterday at the Sable-Castelli Gallery.

At 30, Astman is one of Toronto's most talented young photographers and her idiosyncratic experiments with a Polaroid instant camera are doing much to persuade the general public that photography can be accepted as an art form.

Her current show of hot and sensual murals, reveals that this inventive artist, born in Rochester, N.Y., has employed a number of painterly techniques to create depth in her pieces even though they began as absolutely flat, unmanipulated SX-70 Polaroid instant prints.

Walking into the Hazelton Ave. gallery, the visitor is immediately struck by the vivid, dazzling effects of Astman's work. She has created a total environment consisting of 14 four-by-four foot Ektacolor murals which have a throbbing, rhythmic life of their own.

Enamel paint

The fascinating thing about this particular show — the 14th one-woman exhibition Astman has had over the last eight years — is her use of red.

She has literally sprayed all sorts of household, sport, and carpentry objects — like toilet brushes, basketballs and saws — with a brilliant enamel car paint which she calls firebird red.

She has scattered these ordinary objects in what looks like a haphazard — but which is in fact a carefully contrived — fashion all around the peripheral black border of her compositions.

In the centre of each mural she has hung a bright red square of cotton fabric which throws her own black-clad body — standing just in front — into a completely different and highly contrasting spacial plane.

The foreground of each mural is made up of more bright red objects — such as a telephone or a still life fruit arrangement — which Astman holds in her own hands.

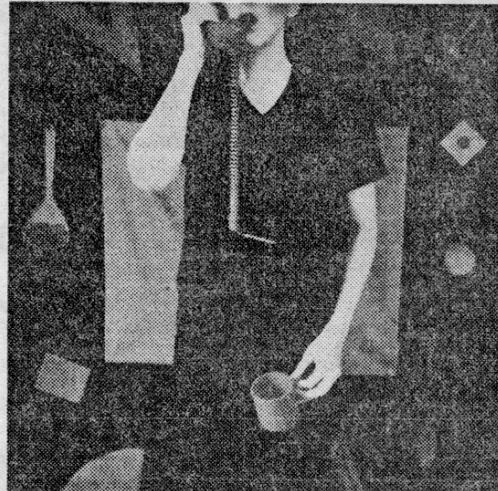
All these carefully arranged objects and the almost Renaissance symmetry and balance of the over-all composition produces a mesmerizingly rich effect. Not only do such mundane objects as pencils, cup hooks, watering cans, wooden spoons, mallets and trowels become transformed because of their brilliant red color, they contribute an almost dance-like pattern to each mural.

Astman has arranged all these objects as would an abstract painter. Frequently, she places them on a diagonal so that they direct the viewer's focus in towards the central image of her own black form which she has cropped just beneath the eyes as well as cut off at the knees.

Although in everyday life, Astman says she never wears lipstick, for her photographs she has made up her mouth with a sensual berry red color. This color relates her mouth thematically to the other red objects in her murals.

But because the artist has cropped her photographs to eliminate the eyes, the viewer's gaze is drawn like a magnet to this sensual and slightly-open erotic mouth.

Says Astman: "For me, red implies so much. I associate it with all sorts of nasty things, like Communism or being a whore. In other words, I see red as having bad moral and political implications. But because I grew up in a house where there was never anything red, I also associate it with excitement or an element of something for-



Firebird red: Artist-photographer Barbara Astman created this glorious red and black mixture of found objects and self-photography, at the Sable-Castelli Gallery.

bidden."

There is no doubt that she has achieved a powerful sense of excitement with her dynamic red and black murals on view until April 18. The only other color permitted in these pieces — which cost \$2,400 each — is the white of Astman's own skin, whether it be her lower face and neck or her arms and hands.

She has also surrounded her murals with an outer border of white inside which is a narrow secondary border colored red. There are at least six different spatial depths in every one of her 14 murals.

These stark but devastatingly successful recent works represent a break away from the word-and-image relationship which has dominated Astman's photographs for the last two years.

Without words

For instance, her 1979 color photograph titled *Dear Jared* — included in *Viewpoint: Twenty-Nine By Nine*, a group exhibition now at Toronto's Harbourfront Gallery until April 26 — shows the artist posing before a subtle purple-rose colored backdrop. A foreground screening effect is created by a text which Astman typed directly onto her Polaroid print while it was still malleable.

This photograph, like others from the same series, has nuances of color and fabric folds which have totally disappeared in her current work. Also included in her earlier photographs were Astman's eyes and sometimes her entire head.

Today she maintains: "I am trying to prevent people recognizing me in my work."

Now a landed immigrant, Astman teaches experimental arts and photography at the Ontario College of Art (from which she graduated in 1973).

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London owns some of her work and she has also participated in group shows in Canada and the U.S.

Recently, she was awarded a commission by CIL to execute a four-by-16 foot mural for one of the lobbies in the company's new head office building located at Yonge St. and Sheppard Ave. E. "It will not be as vibrant or intense as the pieces in my current show," she says, "but will be made up of purples, reds, pinks and oranges."