

with words in the form of a letter. The richness of the superimposition was almost a fugue given that both text and picture had to be considered together; Alain Resnais does this in his films audiovisually.

The present series was originally composed of 20 prints, although only 15 of them have come west from Toronto. Astman has again taken polaroid pictures of herself but has dispensed with words. Instead she has surrounded herself with things, but in a unique way. All of the pieces feature the artist against a black background on which has been placed a red square. In each print Astman holds something — a tool, a utensil, a hat, a piece of fruit — and the black ground is hung with many other everyday things. Many of the held objects turn up in other pictures pinned to the backdrop. All of these things have been painted a brilliant red; the artist is dressed in black, her lips are crimson-glossed and the skin tone of her face, hands and arms is almost ivory. While in earlier series the cropping seemed to be occasionally arbitrary, here it is exact; the frame always cuts the figure just above the nose and at the knees. All pieces are blown up to 122 x 122 cm, so that Astman is life-size, and the objects appear in proportion.

The question might be asked, Is Astman really taking photographs? Or has she moved into a new dimension? The use of the polaroid technology suggests that time is highly significant for her; the instantaneous result seems fundamental, as if the idea had to be expressed all at once to give it validity. Her previous use of narrative and letter writing partake of this same quality. The question whether these images are photographs, in the sense that other camera artists produce meaningful work, is then not important. Astman achieves the effect she wants, and it is something very different from merely taking pictures; the idea truly becomes the work (and the series is really one work), "an environment to hold me in

(enclosure), a non-decorative use of pattern" as the artist states. There is a searching imagination at work here. The transformation of reality in these pictures is subtle and deceptive. Astman erases the reality of her objects, and of herself, through the stark colour contrasts. The very redness of the things gives them a shared aspect in that it detracts from their function; but at the same time it accentuates their basic shape and underlines their function while adding to the perception of them as objects.

In her own case, Astman has submerged herself as much as possible in the background through her black clothing, but has allowed the red section to identify her torso as human. Throughout the series her figure comes and goes; she even varies the length of her sleeves to permit different degrees of contrast between her skin colour and the others. She connects herself to red and redness through her lipstick and her tableau-like presentation of the objects she holds; and this is her function here, to hold the objects. And she has removed the most vital sign of life, her eyes, so that her identity, her being there, is even more in question. In comparison, her earlier prints were hand-tinted in pastel shades which let a note of nostalgia creep in, denying the immediacy of the medium. The identity of the figures and their environment and the relationship between them was never in question, although the references contained in the words could be ambiguous.

With these pictures Astman has created a personal iconography, part of a life displayed for consideration in a rigidly formal way. But the form-versus-content dichotomy is constantly confronted and in the crunch not completely resolved. The content is precisely judged, the form perhaps too stylized. This may be because the prints are consciously painterly in the compositional sense, while the images are relentlessly those of photography. Even so, Astman's work can never be

viewed or interpreted with the usual visual and emotional expectations.

Arthur McDougall

Barbara Astman
Southern Alberta Art Gallery
 Lethbridge
 September 5 to 27

Photography has just as many problems, both for the artist and for those trying to understand the artist's intent, as any other visual medium. The most obvious hurdle is the technology involved; it keeps getting in the way. As much as with painting and sculpture, a photograph can be worked at (technically) and much of this interference is not too comprehensible to the average viewer who takes pictures of the kids with an instamatic and hopes that they look all right when developed.

Barbara Astman has solved, for herself, a great many of the problems simply by using photographs as a medium with which to go beyond the image which comes from the camera. She has produced a number of series in the last few years which in effect are calculated explorations of a point of view. The *Visual Narrative Series*, first shown about two years ago, used images of herself and friends in combination with words to tell stories. In another series, "Untitled, I was thinking about you . . .", she used herself as the sole model and covered the photographs



Barbara Astman, *untitled polaroid photograph* (1980), 122 x 122 cm, coll: Winnipeg Art Gallery