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Barbara Astman follows her instincts instead of fashion to explore romance, motherhood, power and longing in her theatrical photographs, on show at Sable-Castelli.

Astman's slick photos unveil myths of romance

BARBARA ASTMAN, *Sable-Castelli Gallery* (33 Hazelton), opening this Saturday (April 16) to May 7, 961-0011.

By LIZ WYLIE

Barbara Astman works with very personal themes and images to create her appealing pieces. Using her own body, and found or created images and objects, Astman has been exhibiting her distinctive photography in Toronto for 15 years. In her current series, she returns to red, the hallmark feature of her 1980 Red series. In earlier works, the artist portrayed herself from the cheeks down, surrounded by red-painted household objects.

"You just can't beat the combination of red with black and white," says Astman. "Red carries so many implications too — social, political, sexual, even literary."

"In this series, I was fascinated with an image surrounded by a curtain. The curtain for me is very much wrapped up with the mystique of theatre or opera or any event like a puppet show you saw as a child. When the curtains go up, something happens. The format of curtains makes it a special presentation, rather than something more documentary looking."

To produce her large format colour prints, Astman uses negatives made from Polaroids she has shot herself.

"I love the Polaroid because it lacks grain," Astman explains. "It gives a very painterly effect, like velvet. Maybe some day I'll want to work with that pointillist effect of the enlarged grain from photography, but for this I wanted the curtains to be really luscious."

The five pieces in this show each contain three images. The relationships among these combined images form the meaning of each piece. Some are easy to read. In one, a 50s-looking couple in love are flanked by a baby and a dog; two outcomes of 50s romance which seemed "natural" at that time. Other works are more oblique, like the glamorous woman flanked by twin interior scenes of an antique chair beside a heavy swag curtain.

Repressed glamour

"I was thinking about longing when I did this piece. I'm sure it has a lot to do with having this normalcy in my life right now, with husband-and-child-and-house — the whole thing. You have to be centred. You have no choice but to be as grounded as you can possibly be. So a side of me — like that Sophia Loren type — has to be a little repressed at this point. And that's okay. I think it's something many females go through. The balancing

act of being a mother, that whole new way of being, is something my works discuss in a subtle way, without words."

Astman is not only concerned with women's themes. There are also works involving men and male feelings in her current series.

"I don't like the word *feminist* anymore. I'm just trying to express something personal, and I'm female. I hope my work will be honest and set an example to my daughter and to my students. Feminist now seems to be anti-male, and I feel very much pro-people."

Astman's evolution to producing photo pieces based on Polaroids is fascinating and erratic. She drew and painted as a child, growing up in Rochester, New York, and always knew she wanted to be an artist. After high school, she studied design and silversmithing but felt dissatisfied.

"The Vietnam war was going on and I was spending more time demonstrating than going to classes. Politically it felt so wrong for me to be pounding silver to make teapots and jewelry while people were dying in Vietnam. When you're young, you're incredibly vulnerable, you're just learning to be aware of all these things. I applied to the Ontario College of Art (OCA) in Toronto because there

was a flow of draft dodgers coming here, and I gravitated with that."

Accidental discovery

Astman began as a sculpture student at OCA and discovered photography by accident when she borrowed a friend's camera to document some of her sculptures. There was film left on the roll, which Astman used up by shooting arrangements of objects in her room.

"When I saw the contact sheet from that roll of film, it was one of those experiences when you can say you've had an epiphany. I saw in a flash that I could pull all my ideas and skills together in one art form."

The early 70s OCA photo classes were strictly technical, so Astman learned the basics from friends and began working with photo-sculpture, creating sewn, quilted pieces on photo-sensitive linen, using personally significant images. After graduation she discovered colour Xerox, but had to commute to Rochester to make her work since the technology was not available in Toronto until 1977, when Astman established the colour Xerox artists' program at Visual Arts Ontario.

"I was on the beach in Florida for a family vacation one Christmas. I was getting really bored and I felt like doing some work, but I had no colour Xerox machine there. I remember thinking, 'This is just stupid, to be dependent on a huge piece of equipment.' I'd been thinking about the Polaroid camera, so I just went to a store and bought one, and came back to the beach and started arranging sea shells and taking pictures of them. Later I began writing on the emulsion while it was still wet, eventually typing on it."

Seductive quality

Astman works with sculpture as well as photography, and makes extensive use of text. She feels that the ideas she wishes to express in each series determine the medium and form the art will take. In her recent work with the red curtains, Astman chose to use no words and to restrict herself to photography. The work is mature, with nothing fuzzy about it. It is sophisticated, luxurious and very slick. This richness of visual effect has begun to act against Astman.

"My feeling is that you just continue to be honest to yourself and keep working. You can't work to please others."

CHRIS NICHOLLS