

art/text

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Australia

Barbara Astman

Jane Corkin Gallery, Toronto

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Barbara Astman's career has spanned more than 23 years of photo-based media innovations, but has always been about more than the lure of new technology. Astman's staged and sequential work suggests issues of identity, systems of representation, gender perspectives, and the anti-narrative of popular irony. The current series, titled *Scenes from a Movie for One*, while process-intensive, is her most stripped-down work to date.

These eight self-portraits were originally SX-70 Polaroids which were then re-photographed as 35-millimeter black-and-white negatives, and then enlarged to 8-by-10 prints. A Polaroid close-up box was used to shoot color details of the prints, which converted the black-and-white to tones. Once the Polaroid backing was peeled off, Astman began scratching the image surface—a reductive rather than additive process. These images were re-photographed in 35-millimeter and enlarged to 20-by-24-inch Ektacolor prints. The second reading of the "scenes" were multiple image works, 32 "scenes" assembled in a grid of four-by-eight, and produced as color and black-and-white Xerox "scripts" as heat transfers on paper. The laborious process does not exemplify complexity for its own sake, but a gradual disintegration of any notion of the photograph-as-document. This means to this end is a way of literally and figuratively scratching out a personal correspondence from the edge.

Unlike Astman's earlier image-text work, this



is a silent film, which boasts one of the characteristics of all film: to record and suspend something in a temporal vitrine. The finale—a chiaroscuro effect—is about the presence of the body rather than portraiture as character study. It brings to mind Eugène Carrière's turn-of-the-century sepia-toned paintings, as well as the early "static" films of Andy Warhol and Keir Dullea's Cinerama-scaled blinking eye during his Jupiter entry in Stanley Kubrick's *2001* ("hypnotic and immensely boring"), which is at once trying to see and being blinded.

A dilemma for the artist-as-photographer is the ravenous appetite of advertising glamour. One of Astman's *Untitled, I was thinking about you ...* series from 1979-80—a punkish, slouched-with-cigarette self-portrait, with diaristic notation—was used for the cover of a mainstream Canadian rock album in 1980 (seemingly record companies can never get their irony straight). For some, the parasitic traffic between art and promotion is a healthy road of relevance, and Astman's "scenes" could just as easily be co-opted for some other purpose. But in the free market, Astman's "scenes" can be linked to Man Ray's seminal surrealist *Object to be Destroyed* (1923): the eye of a former lover cut out and pinned to a metronome. As an onlooker took him at his word, Man Ray eventually titled its replacement *Indestructible Object*. At the end of the "movie," Astman's "object to be destroyed"—the first Polaroid stage—is an indestructible object too. Her etched lines are telling for their sense of beauty rather than the vanity of self-obsession.

Ihor Holubizky

BARBARA ASTMAN,
THIRTY-TWO FRAMES FROM
SCENES FROM A MOVIE FOR
ONE, 1997, TRANSFER PRINT
ON PAPER, 13.5 x 30.5
INCHES EACH.