

# Rewind

## Barbara Astman

◀◀ CORKIN/SHOPLAND GALLERY, TORONTO

While on a March-break holiday in Cuba two years ago, Toronto artist Barbara Astman was struck by the ubiquitousness in Cuba of the image of revolutionary leader Che Guevara. While some have decried the cheapening of the memory of the leftist martyr by the plethora of products bearing his face—so-called “Che chic”—Astman was amazed at the huge range and deep cultural penetration of what seemed like a popularized and pervasive product placement. How could she not respond in some way as an artist to her Cuban experience? But what could she do with Che? The answer was both very Latin and purely Astman—she would dance with him.

Back in Toronto, donning a T-shirt bearing a black-and-white photographic image of Che's face, Astman arranged herself before a Polaroid camera in her studio—something that she used to do consistently in her work in the early 1980s, but has rarely done in more than 20 years—and danced to music, twisting and sometimes pulling on the T-shirt, distorting the image of her macho dance partner. The images in the exhibition were produced by scanning the Polaroids and outputting them as 36-x-36-inch giclée prints.

Rather than the shiny, reflective surfaces of Astman's photo-based works from the late 1970s and early 1980s, these prints, produced with ink, have the softness that she adopted in her work beginning in the mid-1990s, in series such as *Seeing and Being Seen*, from 1995, *Dreaming Impressionism*, from 1999, and her *Paris Postcards* works from 2001. As well, the *dancing with che* images embody a sensuous, even sexual quality. In fact, it was this characteristic of the Cuban people that impressed Astman on holiday, the looseness and ease the people have in their bodies, generally in stark contrast to stereotypical Canadian attitudes. There is a nice edge of irony and self-consciousness to this series, however, that is reassuringly Canadian. After all, isn't there something ridiculous about a middle-aged woman dancing with abandon while wearing the image of a ruthless revolutionary, perhaps the ultimate portrait of instantly recognizable machismo?

Given its sensuousness and sexuality, this fantasy dance reads as a private one, and the viewer has been given only quick, frozen glimpses with each of the 18 images, as though we are looking at a group of film stills from an illicitly shot movie. Along with this feeling of privacy, there is something nostalgically girlish about Astman's activity here, reminiscent of solitary hours spent mooning about in our bedrooms.

Audacious, humorous and improbable, the images in *dancing with che* are captivating. The series brings together all the elements that have made Astman's best work so interesting and emphatic: the personal, the intuitive, the lived experience kept palpable, her own body brought in as a prop. Her means are simple and kept to the minimum. This is not work about technique, though skilled technique does play a vital role. It is work that co-opts (everything from the viewer to an iconic image), using something so simple and yet deeply profound—the archetype of the dance—as a metaphor for life. LIZ WYLIE

BARBARA ASTMAN *dancing with che* #22 2002  
Digital output on archival paper 94 x 91.5 cm

