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# ARTWEEK

## CULTURAL ARTIFICE

San Francisco / Robert McDonald

For introductions '78 the Tyson Gallery is exhibiting a large group of large acrylic paintings by Bill Ferguson — art mom blown, each 80½" x 48". Though crowded, the installation works, and the overall effect is imposing rather than uncomfortable.

Ferguson's subjects are females, high fashion, store window mannequins rendered in meticulous, airbrushed photorealist technique. Most of them are stylishly clothed, and it's occasionally possible to identify the designers. The fabrics, the flesh (below and black as well as white) and the hair appear as real as those of live fashion models. And therein is the secret of the magic of Ferguson's paintings — their ambiguity. We know that the subjects are store-window mannequins (dummies). We see them through glass that reflects the environment behind us. We see them without their wigs — bald, as if prepared for brain surgery. We see the blade where their various parts join, arms to shoulders and torsos to legs. We even see them dismembered with their limbs grotesquely scattered. And yet, while knowing that Ferguson's works are imitations of life (true-to-life-removed paintings of mannequins of models), still we sense a nearly palpable presence, a psychological tension between the artificial and the natural, the carbon dioxide and our conditioned associations.

Among the subjects there seems to be something for every taste: the sporty black beauty of *Red Bag*, the super-sophisticated lady of *Soft* in her brown Calvin Klein outfit, the playful, tarty Margot in a party environment with colored streamers, the Greta Garbo-as-Hindchina quality of *Ursula* in military drag, the bright pool and shuttleness of the miss in Sue's Corsillac, and so on. The most powerful are the images of disembodied mannequins, especially *For Laura Mars*, with their suggestion of bathroom drains. In more than one way, they resemble Renaissance paintings of religious martyrs.

What Ferguson gives us are overt statements about contemporary standards of beauty. His subjects are undeniably beautiful, voluptuous and seductive, even when we note their protuberant eyes staring over our shoulders, even when they lash hair and arms and legs, even when we can see that they are hollow. The poses are still provocative, the gestures of the hands expressive, the features sensual, the lips lubricious.

Some viewers may find Ferguson's paintings decadent, and indeed they may be. If so, they remind us that decadence is not for the weak, either physically or spiritually, nor for the undecided. In these skillfully painted, disturbing works Ferguson explores the vitality of artifice and its place in our lives and society. He is not interested only in creating beautiful surfaces.□

BILL FERGUSON: RED BAG, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 83½ x 48", at Tyson Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Greg Reeder.

# Take 5 with Jeff Jarvis

## Strike up the band

DEEP LAVISH STUDIES AGAIN! The 49th San Francisco Opera season has just begun, but already we have details on the 1980 season. The last sessions are at work again, making secrets out of San Francisco as You have known — just like then, and next season, when we tell you about the season season before the season season after.

As we have it, three choices are "dinner definite" for the next season:

□ "Sonia Sennacherib" by Verdi, with Barbara Hendricks in the title role.

□ "Sir Fess-sturr Schattan" by Strauss, with Birgit Nilsson.

□ Thomas Ashlin's "Pilgrim," with Gwendolyn Jones and Spas Wenkoff. The above choices open just Right [Brothers Author, please to conduct this one.

□ Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro."

□ Verdi's "Macbeth."

And that's just the beginning. Watch this space.

FROM THE FART LAND: Elton John has left The City and left his mark on it.

There was the arrest and jailing of his manager, John Reid, who pulled up (at a function at the Fairmont) and was greeted with a shrill handful of cops.

And then there's the matter of the pool.

After John's concert in Berkeley, the other night, an artist named Bill Ferguson sent John one of his paintings — a painting of a slum housewife, a work of "photo realism," John called Ferguson, said he liked the painting and invited Ferguson to the Fairmont for a drink. Then John decided to buy more — nine more paintings, for a total of $31,200.

But the man at the Tyson gallery in San Francisco who sold the works balked and he's refused the Tyson brokers' angle: much to say.

OUTLOOK: The San Francisco Arts Festival is in trouble, financially. What a relief it is, after a summer filled with dull and dreary brown pots and boring batiks and rubber stamps at all the street fairs, to find the Festival's organizers have rather mature and artful boring pots and even less-than-mysterious "art." With so much to display, that's inevitable.

But there is a lot of fine work — imaginative and colorful pots, glass, jewelry, weaving, sculpture, graphics. It's the one real art fair The City has, and it only comes once a year. So, each is at the Civic Center before it closes forever.□

The festival opening, though, was less than auspicious. There weren't many people there — except for the teams rolling around on pogo-sticks for giant Jones Sodaas, the Taiwan espresso emporium, played to a small crowd. But then there were speeches. Mayor Moscone, the tub-thumping Supervisor Molinari and others were on hand with a check for $5,000 as the "Pop-a-cola Star Performance for the City of San Francisco. It's from

Olivia Newton-John grows older

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The City supports its artists," Barbara is increasingly easier to get by. Whatever it means, is an early version of the recession.

And Dianne Feinstein set it for the same time that she and Jerry Brown have set for the opening ceremonies. It probably had something to do with the boundaries of voters Dianne and Jerry are hoping to lure in '79 who will be voting in the Mayor of City Hall ringing "We Shall Not Be Moved."

But the art was here.

THE ORIGINAL: As I predicted last week, Bill Ferguson's controversial cast of "Art Mannequins" has taken over the show town, at the Tyson. This cast has Andrea De Mornis, Artemis Mahjouris, Ken Kewley, Jeff Gorrell, Jeff Lee, Jeff Al, Noël Carlos. Be outmodelled.

Ferguson paintings are starting to sell

Bill Ferguson

Ferguson paintings on exhibit in San Francisco

'Narrative Art' and Passing Patinas at the Galleries

Couldn't cut of watch falls short of her pictorial craft

# Bill Ferguson visits at Elton John home

Bill Ferguson, formerly of Albia, was recently a guest at the Beverly Hills home of Elton John. Ferguson and the rock star had met last fall when John was performing in Berkeley during his three-month American tour. They became acquainted when John purchased a quantity of Ferguson's art work for his London estate.

Ferguson said that Elton phoned him earlier last week inviting him to come for a visit and to watch the making of his newest album. Presently, John is in a Los Angeles recording studio finishing work on two records due for spring release.

Ferguson spent a week with Elton before returning home to San Francisco and stated that he was very pleased to have the opportunity to get to know Elton as a real person. He also said he was impressed with Elton's ability to compose a song in a very short time and the degree to which Elton is a very kind and genuine individual.

Ferguson is the son of Bill and Dorothy Ferguson of Albia.

*Elton John and Bill Ferguson*

*Bill Ferguson's Manikins:*

# Sexual Nightmares

by Michael McGuiness

Bill Ferguson's show of paintings, Manikins, (at the Tyson Gallery through August 4), is a curious essay in what might be termed "romantic photo-realism." It is also an almost clinical experiment in engendering a nightmare of the sexual psyche.

Working from slide photographs taken at night of San Francisco store windows, the recent emigrant from Iowa has created a dozen or so large canvases showing manikins of women. Some are nude, but most display the new nostalgic and vaguely erotic costumes of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties.

As you might expect, the paintings portray a stage, wax-works artificiality that borders on the special, even horrid. One-eyed or sun-glassed faces with impervious, air-brushed complexions are framed beneath weird hats against an impenetrably flat background — a cold neon glow or darkness.

The flat, depthless color of the canvases mimic banal, tasteless postcards which we reluctantly struggle to animate, to understand the message sent from years away. We begin to see how those sharply lined joints of the models are designed for movement. Those dead, hollow-eyed women may stir and, zombie-like, seek contact. Beneath their chapeline clothes they may yearn, thrill, ever, shockingly, give birth.

Bill Ferguson's *Renata*, acrylic on canvas (81½" x 48"), 1978.
photo by Greg Reeder

And give birth they did, these ghosts of mothers and movie star lovers that haunt the mind. By making efforts to invest these fantasies with some importance, some life, Ferguson creates a bridge between present and past and brothers long walled-away begins to be reclaimed.

The few nudes in the show are disarmingly clever ways of treating the special beauty of the human body. Modern art abandoned representational painting, and especially the nude as a played-out mine, primarily because of the advent of photography. The nude was lost as a subject of art as it became the object of other experiences.

But in Ferguson's work we are, after all, not looking at representations of real bodies, but of mere plaster junk, and this trick of distancing works. The glowing flesh and milking curves of these bald, disjointed window dummies can be felt poignantly, sensually as a fresh experience. There is no necessity to cover the image with the musty blankets of our sexual mores or cultural boredom.

This is a valiant attempt to reclaim the human body from the artistic trash heap, to rescue it from the photograph which has used it so badly. Most, it offers the observer a chance to break free of the prevailing commercial and intellectual pornography that treats the body as a gross stimulant or as an object to be manipulated or redesigned.

The artist employs his acrylic technique with confidence, but there seems to be a lack of total commitment evidenced by the occasionally rough brushwork and the too forceful use of the airbrush. Looking too is a real sense of personal style and identity, an artistic signature that has nothing to do with content. But all this means is that there is tremendous room for growth for a young artist who has begun to explore his capabilities and make out his ground.

Before this current involvement, Bill Ferguson made paintings of cars and motorcycles, those powerful totems of America. Now he has begun to make fascinating archaeological discoveries in the necropolis of our sexual consciousness.

ART NEWS AND NOTES: The strike at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is over. A settlement has been reached, and the events of July have been rescheduled.

August 3 will now be the opening date for "Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes," an exhibition of sculptures, stage sets and environmental projects by Isamu Noguchi, one of the major American artists of the twentieth century, who enjoyed a thirty-year artistic collaboration with choreographer Martha Graham.

The show "Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960" will close this Sunday, July 29. ▼

Iowa-born-and-educated artist Bill Ferguson's large acrylic paintings - each is 64" x 48" - are disquieting, yet humorously engaging. The effect is satirical, often grotesque and amusing store-window grand guignol. The acrylics are "imitations of life three times removed (paintings of mannequins of models)" as Robert McDonald aptly describes them in Art Week (July 28, '79).

Commenting on the irony in commercialism, Ferguson says, "The marketing of haute couture has come to embrace the entire mainstream of the clothes-buying public and employs elements of everything from criminal violence to sadomasochism to transvestitism in its advertisement. We find ourselves in the midst of such phenomena as mass consumption of designer jeans, women as female impersonators, and mannequins themselves as icons to high fashion."

"Both this trend and my artwork can be seen as rather stark and insidious. They also can convey wry humor, however, when coupled with the ability to laugh at ourselves."

Ferguson has exhibited in one-man shows at San Francisco's Tyson Gallery and at People's National Bank in Albia, Iowa. His work graces public and private collections, among them those of Wells Fargo Bank, Senator John Culver of Iowa and Elton John, who purchased ten paintings in the mannequin series.

- the ADVOCATE, May 1, 1980

## Ferguson's work chosen for display

Bill Ferguson of Mt. L Albia is one of 125 Iowa artists who are displaying work at the Sioux City Art Center in an Artists' Exhibition on display at the Sioux City Art Center.

Ferguson's acrylic painting "Headlights" was chosen for display at the art show.

This annual juried exhibition represents work of Iowa artists, since high school age. A total of 900 works were submitted for showing, with 125 being chosen by Daniel J. Robbins, director of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, and Jan Van Der Marck, Art Museum, Missouri.

The exhibition represents 125 artists in series of painting, drawing, prints, sculpture, and crafts. It will continue through June 8.

## Ferguson wins art contest

Bill Ferguson was named the winner Saturday of the $25 first prize in the annual conservation art contest sponsored by the Monroe County Soil Conservation District.

Second place in the overall competition went to Bruce Lindberg, who third place was awarded to Karen Casper. They received $15 and $5, respectively.

Ferguson was also the winner in the water color division of the contest. Beth Turney finished second in the division, and Nathan Conway was third.

In the oils division, Mrs. Casper was first, while Linda Dicks and Deb Overmyer finished second and third.

Lindberg was the top finisher in the pastels division. David Titus finished behind Lindberg in second place, while Judy Williams finished third.

Jon Irwin was judged as the top entrant in the pencil and charcoal division. Mary Kollman was second.

The winning entries in the art contest will be on display at the Peoples National Bank and the First Iowa State Bank.