

**HAREM: NEW WORK
BY CHRIS KOMATER**
Bernard Toale Gallery
450 Harrison Ave, Boston
Through February 24



Above: two images from Chris Komater's "Cleave"
Below: F. Holland Day's "Hypnos."

Tens of thousands will visit the F. Holland Day exhibition currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts. Perhaps a few hundred gallery goers interested in photography will see the San Francisco Chris Komater's first East Coast show at the Bernard Toale Gallery. Those who do take in both shows will be rewarded. Comparison of Day and Komater's work is inevitable and the contrast between them illuminating. A less bland way to say this is that the proudly gay Komater's work is modest, tender and funny - everything that the closeted, privileged, sentimental Day's is not.

This is, of course, unfair to Day. He lived and worked in another time and cannot be taken to task for aesthetic strategies that heighten the homoerotic character of much of his art by disguis-

ENTERING KOMATER'S HAREM

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ing it. Were Day at work today he might still choose an aesthetic that suggests in a stylized way rather than states in a

stylized way as did Robert Mapplethorpe who re-staged and re-shot several of Day's images. The comparison advanced does not pit the superior new-open, truthful, celebratory against the forces of repression. It is more a matter of how dated Day's daring looks and how fresh Komater's work appears within its self-imposed limits.

The MFA designers have embalmed Day's work. By placing it in the "context" of the wallpaper he lived with and the heavy doorframes and lintels of his Norwood house - now a museum - they emphasize Day's antique pictorialism. The point seems to be that Day's work does not transcend his moment. Fair enough. A great deal of valuable art is dated if only until fashion turns to find it contemporary and chic.

The problem is that the MFA installation underscores Day's campy rhetoric so his most famous image, "The Seven Words" and his "classical" male nudes are hilarious. Who, one

can't help but hoot, did he think he was kidding? Probably he meant to kid no one. He seems to have entertained only the loftiest of ideals and this is where Komater's work, especially his fascination with human hair comes in.

Komater is obsessed; so much so that he employs strategies that present without tarding up the nature of his obsession. His compositions are equal-sized frames, as many as 36 and as few as 4, arranged an inch apart to form either columns or kaleidoscopic squares and rectangles. The subject of most of these is parts of the nude male body, but body hair - delicately curled, wispy as mare's tail summer clouds, damp squiggles and whorls - is what absorbs the eye. Where Day is grandiose



and florid Komater is intimate and at ease, a whisper after Day's bombast. If Day's work never lets up on the "art," Komater's is near artless in



its attempt to draw the reader in. It is a small matter but the glass over his prints is non-reflective so that the reader enters them at once.

"Betty Grable" and "Turner" (Lana, I assume) are to me the least engaging because they're the most obvious of Komater's montages. The four-panel "Grable" presents blond sausage curls in four poses. Just hair, no flesh. "Turner" is 36 panels arranged in a whorl, pleasant enough to look at but again absent flesh. It is hair on flesh, male flesh that dominates the five most successful pieces in the show.

Of these five, my favorites are the 36 panel black and white 59" x 59" "Sweetheart" and the 12 panel 51.5" x 69" black and white "Pelt." "Sweetheart" is a man's naked butt, turned this way and that to form a circular chain of vaguely heart shapes. They could be the butts of Renaissance putti, but for the hair fuzzily down the back, into the cleft and sparse over the cheeks. A hairless body can look like marble, a piece of sculpture, not naked but nude.

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Hair accentuates nakedness, and the human form - or the human inside the form. This is what Komater seems to want the viewer's eye to touch.

He also finds hair simply beautiful, as in "Pelt" where he has lit his male model's fur of back hair to emphasize its silver grayness against a black background. These prints could be stills from a film noir. We see the back of the model's sideburned head and his shaved neck, close-up, eavesdropping as if achieving a desired intimacy.

Both montages have a sense of humor about themselves. I imagine "Sweetheart" will make some viewers laugh out loud with pleasure. "Pelt" might provoke the giggles that this-is-what-it-really-looks-like specificity can.

In both montages Komater's regard is sensual and tender. I am reminded of Ron Macek's sculpture of his naked, dead father in the notorious "Sensation" show. It lay on the floor three feet or so long, ready for the winding sheet, as perfect a replica as you could ask for and intensely human because, in part, of its body hair, the human details a beloved sees and treasures.

F. Holland Day recruited his models from acquaintances, friends and the boys he took under his wing and who like Kahlil Gibran he helped educate. The photographic evidence is that they gave themselves wholeheartedly to his enterprise. Komater has advertised "Naked Hairy Men Wanted for Photography." This has obviously brought some amazing patterns of hair his way as is evident in "Nape" and in the 8" x 10" works, four panels in one, that are not on view but will be shown to you upon asking.

While looking at his work, I remembered a college friend, a big man, tackle on the football team, who had an unusually hairy back, one that others made fun of. He had a line that turned their lame jibes to laughter, "When I die," he shouted, "I'm going to will my body to the Looms of Mohawk!" If he lives in San Francisco as well, I'm wondering what he would make of an artist who sees hair, so often derided as unsightly, as beautiful.

I also remembered having lunch with the artist Sophie Calle and admiring her jewelry. "Hair," she explained, pointing out to the patterns of brown, brunette and blonde hair that had been made into earrings, a necklace and rings. "Victorian memento mori from a relative or a beloved's hair woven and braided."

Fetish items, I suppose, and so in their way are Komater's creations.

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