

WHAT'S MORE CRUDE THAN A CURL?

The Photographs of Chris Komater

Just when you thought you couldn't see an image of the human body with any real interest and curiosity, along comes Chris Komater. This San Francisco artist's body of work includes installation and photography investigating male desire and masculinity within the context of the gay community. Komater's photography includes photos which playfully, sexually, and aggressively in their probing, explore the nude male body. They are photos taken with a lover's or scientist's gaze: close up, intimate, interested, unblinking. The nude male body, largely absent from photography prior to gay culture entering the mainstream (Steve Jenkins, 1997) is split, cut, cropped, and reassembled topsy turvy. And in some of Komater's photos, like those in the recent Patricia Sweetow Gallery show in San Francisco, California (June 6-July 8, 2000) and in previous work, the object of interest and obsession is the bear—large, hairy guys much enamored in the San Francisco gay community. In these photos, the body is taken apart and recombined in endless combinations. Pleasure and investigation become exponential, infinite.

But Komater's photos are more complicated than that. They both invite and repel. Eeeewwww. What is that? What body part is that? Each piece is assembled from several photos, from four to as many as 36 (in the Sweetow show) in a way that has as its center a dark or bright hole or a pinwheel or swastika shape, as well as curls and arcs. The simultaneous suggestion of the pinwheel—an object recalling childhood and replete with pleasure and innocence—and the swastika—indelibly linked to the evil of the Nazis—exemplifies the consistent theme of multiple valences and meanings in Komater's work. What could be more innocent and more crude than a curl whether it is the "public property" of Lana Turner's golden curls (Sweetow show) or the intimate curl of pubic or any other body hair seen close up and intimate, sprouting from its individual, private little follicle? While the photographs themselves are singular, the abstracted images within them are anything but reducible to a monotone of meaning.

The body atomized, cut and refocused in this way, recalls parts of itself, even smaller than what we're seeing. For example, in the recent Sweetow show, the piece *Pelt* (as in an animal pelt or skin (sexual) trophy) is made up of 12 gelatin-silver prints each 15 by 15 inches, the whole thing measuring 51.5 by 69 inches. It is large, but made up of smaller components. *Pelt* is suggestive of a magnified piece of genetic matter, an undulating wave, amoeba-like afloat in space. It points to a smaller identity—chromosomal—and larger—a wave—while simultaneously is identifiable in some of the individual photos making up the piece as a close-up of a hairy male back, shoulder and neck in partial



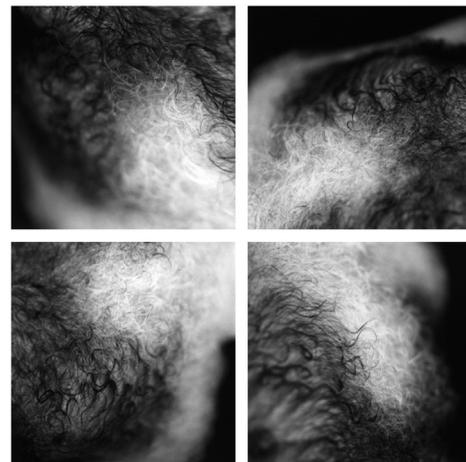
profile. The imagery echoes the pinwheel revolving and radiating out, as if this wave is a snapshot of that spiraling motion. In another piece in the Sweetow show, endearingly entitled *Sweetheart*, the 36 gelatin-silver prints, 7 by 7 inches, in an overall 59 by 59 inch piece, the male buttocks and thighs become floral, petal- or fist-like, arranged in undulating waves recalling the twists and turns of the brain or the folds and curls of the intestines.

The formal beauty of each composition manages to be precise and yet ripe with abundant question and evocation. The construction of the pieces suggests floral shapes, a botanical dictionary. Their obsession with foregrounding shadow and light and the assemblage of "still" shots also suggest motion pictures cut loose from their linear fishnets. I am reminded of the Resnais/Robbe-Grillet film *Last Year at Marienbad*—its stylized, deliberate, formal beauty, puzzling, perspective in question. Though perhaps more appropriate are the noir films like Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* with Robert Mitchum that Komater has used in other pieces. The association between movies and Komater's photographs seems to make sense as Komater notes on his web site (www.chriskomater.com) that he is "obsessed by movies and male desire." These pieces are rife with sexual, and organic suggestion. They suggest the fecundity of the body and the close-up attention of a lover, head on chest, peering into the swirls of dewy hair and curls, wet with perspiration or cum, or the scientist's or sex partner's probing for the hole, the sphincter that opens and closes, the creased flower of the ass.

It is as if Komater has taken Walter Benjamin's notion about the "need to bring things spatially and humanly nearer (being) almost an obsession today, as is the tendency to negate the unique and ephemeral quality of a given event by reproducing it photographically" and twisted it. Komater in his photos makes the experience of the

nude male body an event perhaps even more unique and mysterious than the real McCoy. For the viewer or participant, his work creates an experience, a relation with the body rather than mounts a mere representation of the body itself. In an age of AIDS (still) cresting as it does a period when the male body was finally (openly) held close against another male body/bodies, that same body has receded in distance, in safe sex, in sickness and in death and loss. And yet (there is always a "yet" when writing about Komater's work), there is tenderness, abundance. Komater brings that body close, really up close. He exposes the body's strangeness. He intrigues us, pleases us, confounds us, repels us, exposes us to the nausea of the unrecognizable, brings us up against our human, rational desire to identify, name, classify, pin down (or pin up), to be safe, to be intimate, to be aroused. He almost always allows a toe-hold for the recognizable, but never in isolation. Instead a multiplicity of organic chaos reigns, spins out. Ultimately, the photos are stunning, life-affirming, or hopeful in their abstract beauty and mystery. And yet, elegiac in their memorialization of the romantic and sexual thrill, the physical beauty and fecundity of the male body in particular, and in the chaos and horror attached to all bodies, bodies which in part or sometimes as a whole repel us is their very organic nature, in their crashing together and in their need and in the way they break down, advance toward us and recede from us, mysterious and ungraspable.

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Sources:

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