

REALM OF THE SENSES

BY JERRY SALTZ

SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

Deitch Projects
76 Grand Street
Through July 29

"Sentimental Education" the group show organized by art critic David Rimanelli is sweet on the outside but bitter on the inside. It's got one of those catchy, glamorous, culturally charged titles, and the name of its curator adds as much flavor as the artists who are in it. A perpetually precocious writer, whose language is ornate and tone prickly, Rimanelli has a refined intellect and idiosyncratic but well-informed taste. A born recalcitrant, as a critic he's closest to someone like Gary Indiana, only less fiery. He doesn't always write negative reviews, but when he does, they're something to behold.

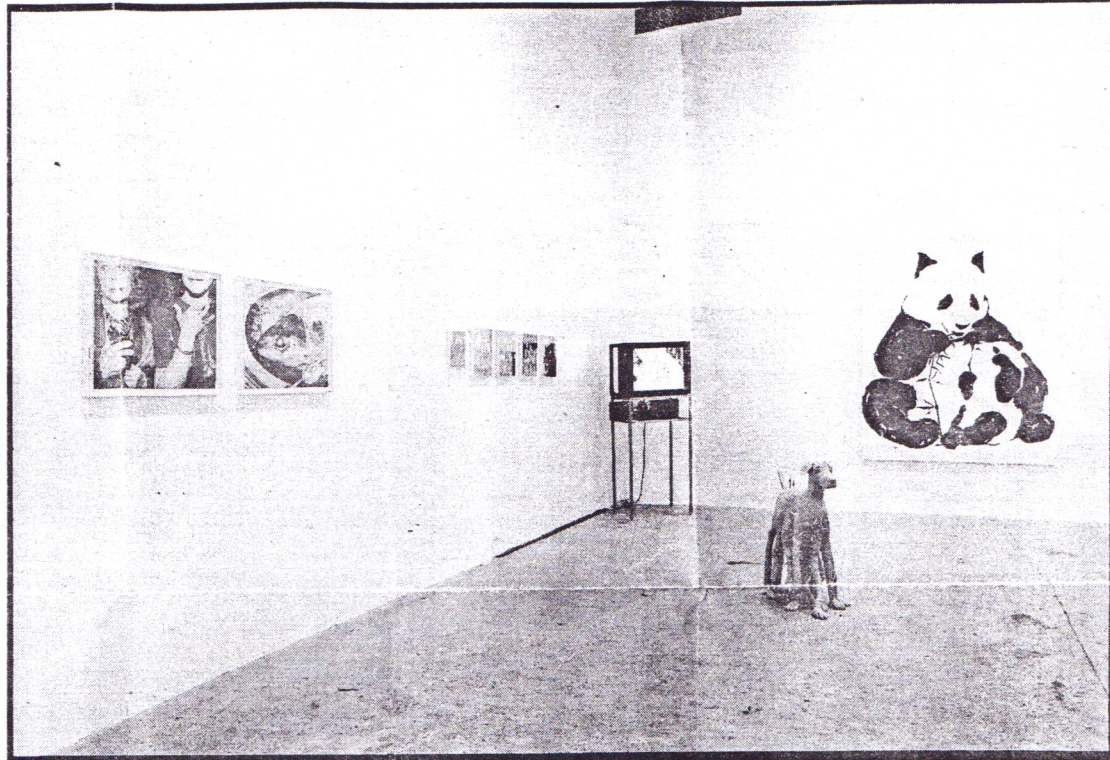
The novel his exhibition is named after is a masterpiece about the bourgeois privilege to make bad decisions. As a story of obsessive love, it falls between Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* and Nabokov's *Lolita* (a recent candidate might be Indiana's *Horse Crazy*). With the events leading up to the 1848 revolution as background, *Sentimental Education* tells the story of Frederic Moreau, a moderately gifted, artistically ambitious young provincial who comes to Paris and immediately gets hung up on a married woman. The self-absorbed, ineffective Frederic squanders his inheritance, learns nothing of the world and little of himself, and ends with amusing memories but unfulfilled dreams.

"This exhibition was inspired," Rimanelli writes, "by the droll absurdity of proposing a mouldy nineteenth-century French classic, Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, as the whimsically dictatorial premise for an absolutely contemporary exhibition." I might have picked Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, with its round-the-clock action and more bohemian characters, but Rimanelli goes with Flaubert, saying the novel provides "correlatives to our current situation."

It turns out he's got a point. With subthemes like lassitude, love, depravity, and power, the parts of this show are better than the whole, but the confluence of curator, title, and these 12 artists (including six newcomers from L.A.) makes for a kinky concoction.

Because many of the artists in "Sentimental Education" have a light touch and a worldly point of view, Elizabeth Peyton presides over the show like a benevolent spirit. But something else hangs in the air: Much of the work here has a spiky, comical, ominous aspect to it; a lot of it deals with hipness, late-night-in-crowd stuff, fucked-up parties, losers who lose, and losers who win. All of which suggests these artists have also picked up on Peyton's latent, darker, more fitful side. It is this intentional misbegotten cosmopolitanism—the delicate shadings between the wayward and the wanton, the lighthearted and the blighted—that makes Rimanelli's show click.

The best example of this is a videotape by John Boskovich titled *North*. It features Gary Indiana, exuding star power, reading from Céline's novel *North*, an account of Céline's desperate flight, from France to Germany in the



JESSICA CRAIG-MARTIN'S PHOTOS (FAR LEFT) WITH HANNAH GREELY'S *RASCAL* (1999) AND ROB PRUITT'S *POWER OF THE PANDA* (2000) AT DEITCH PROJECTS

waning days of World War II. We hear of his stay at the decadent Simplon Hotel in Baden-Baden, "which only took people from the very best families, former reigning princes or Ruhr magnates . . . the wars raging on seven fronts and all the oceans don't interfere with their caviar." With scenes from Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* projected behind Indiana, and a camera circling him like a shark, *North* buzzes with turpitude, grandeur, and intelligence. It isn't a modern *Sentimental Education*, but it twists the twistedness of that novel into a scary, sickening shape.

A similarly sharp extract is found in a pair of Delia Brown's dashing watercolors, depicting a party the artist staged at L.A.'s trendy Chateau Marmont where a group of modish middle-class girls slumped down with bad boys. Although Brown is less whimsical than Peyton, and her subject more commonplace, the smutty, everything-matters cosmopolitanism is familiar. *Still Life With Vince's #*, an image of a dresser covered with the refuse of dissolute behavior, is a contemporary vanitas painting: Lipstick and makeup share space with obligatory books by Flaubert and Bataille, money, a few lines of coke, and the telltale matchbook with Vince's phone number. It's an intimate portrait of a night, a life, and a time.

The two pandas in Rob Pruitt's glittery, kitschy painting might almost be the metaphysical poster animals for "Sentimental

Education." These cute creatures don't do much, but in this context they seem to represent disappearance and brevity. Nearby, Jessica Craig-Martin—the self-appointed fashion assassin—makes disappearing look like a blood sport, as she eviscerates the ancien régime in a devastating paparazzi-like photograph of the gossip columnist Suzy at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel. The palette is pink: the face, lifted; the jewelry, gaudy; and the power, exhausted.

Another kind of exhaustion oozes out of Daria Martin's blissed-out dual-screen video projection of two young people, each lying naked, alone, in a dreamscape of cellophane trees and falling leaves. Here, Adam and Eve are so spent from their own loveliness they can only lie in torpid splendor. If they did get up, they could star in one of Patterson Beckwith's richly colored, very sexy portraits of the new underground in-crowd. Looking very *Lost Illusions* are such "players" as Spencer Sweeney, Colin de Land, Rachel Harrison (wearing, I must say, an Electro T-shirt I also own), and a certain *Miss Sisset Kardel*, a striking blond sitting by her paintings. There's also a beauty of Peyton herself sitting with our powerhouse, the Céline-like Alex Bag, sharing a drink at the dive du jour, Passerby.

Bag, working with Ethan Kramer, contributes a hilarious video whose French title translates to *The Cruel and Curious Life of a Sal-*

monella Pod. Starring a squid-looking puppet, it's a one-of-a-kind horror/snuff/porno/nature documentary melodrama. Given the show's point of view, the salmonella is a demented surrogate for Frederic's silly but enticing adventures. Whatever else this work is, it's categorically alien.

Also very alien is Hannah Greely's *Rascal*, a full-scale plasticine dog with multiple legs and teeny people on its back. It's Romulus and Remus meets the Trojan Horse meets Disney, and one of those absolutely obvious artworks that remain scrupulously elusive. As good, but more batty, is Deb Lacusta's video, which could be called *My Right Foot*. It features the artist penning with said ped overwrought *Sentimental Education*-ish sentences like "Yesterday my heart brimmed over." Lacusta mixes degraded TV sketch comedy with French letters and comes up with something gnarly and bizarre.

Urban mythos, autobiography, and precious moments are apparently major subjects for young artists, who have triangulated Peyton's open-ended attitudinal model with Wolfgang Tillmans's unruffled worldliness and Nan Goldin's shoot-your-mouth-off, we-are-the-champions aesthetic. Even though he says he "loathes" it there, Rimanelli—who moved to L.A. a couple of years ago (and doesn't drive)—has identified a number of the area's promising young artists. He also reminds us that we're all provincials in the city. ▣