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ART VIEW

ART VIEW; Void, Self, Drag, Utopia (And 5 Other Gay Themes)

By Roberta Smith

BERKELEY, Calif.— FEW ART EXHIBITIONS ARE perfect, but some can be markedly imperfect and still be amazing, inspiring one eye-opening, mind-shifting experience after another. "In a Different Light," put together on a shoestring at the University of California, Berkeley, is such an experience. When a work deemed central to its focus is unobtainable -- say, Marcel Duchamp's masterpiece "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" -- a reproduction is substituted. Short cuts aside, this messy laboratory of a show percolates new ideas about contemporary art and its presentation.

"In a Different Light," which runs through April 9, has been organized by Lawrence Rinder, curator at the University Art Museum at Berkeley, and Nayland Blake, a video and installation artist from San Francisco. It aims to account for what its organizers, both of whom are gay, call "the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in 20th-century American art."

It mostly succeeds, outlining some of the enormous contributions of gay artists to contemporary culture. Its map is a complex array of more than 200 works, abstract and representational, by 100 artists, both gay and straight. Their efforts touch on a host of related issues like sexual preference, homosexuality and the self. But they also turn their gaze to society in general.

This show constructs a model for looking at contemporary art, political and otherwise, that is so old and unfashionable it seems almost radical. It is for the most part adamantly visual, even formalist in approach. It is full of unusually revealing juxtapositions of artworks that coax out unexpected meanings and make new connections between different generations and styles.

It covers many emotional zones, from rage and mourning to pride and celebration. Frida Kahlo, wearing a man's suit in "Self-Portrait With Cropped Hair" (a reproduction), has a level gaze of self-sufficiency. Next to this image, Catherine Opie's "Self-Portrait" couches a yearning for domestic normalcy in terms of masochistic ritual: scratched into the artist's naked back is her childhood drawing of two stick-figure women holding hands in front of the requisite house, sun and cloud.

The show has been criticized as having spread itself too thin -- and it may have -- but whether this

is a weakness is debatable. It casts a wide net, pulls in a lot of fish, sorts and resorts them and, in a sense, throws them all back in the ocean in a way that is open-ended and generous rather than narrow and ideological. Mixing virtually every style and medium, it traces multiple strands of influence, thought and history through nine sections: Void, Self, Drag, Other, Couple, Family, Orgy, World and Utopia.

Works by Judy Chicago, Ree Morton, Eve Hesse, Harmony Hammond and Lynda Benglis remind us that feminist artists of the 1970's were the first to tackle the issues of gender, and they suggest how they influenced gay and lesbian artists of the 1980's. Also stressed is the influence of the ephemeral early-60's art of Fluxus; the exhibition begins with a score by one of its godfathers, John Cage. In his exceptional catalogue essay, Mr. Blake sees this subversive, outsider art movement as essentially "queer," a word that is increasingly replacing the gender-linked terms of gay and lesbian.

The show deals briefly with early American modernism, including works by Charles Demuth, Romaine Brooks and Marsden Hartley. It trolls the deep waters of the high-art-low-art debate, pointing up the influences of popular music, transvestism and pornography. (Especially effective is the juxtaposition of one of Demuth's high-porn watercolors of urinating sailors with Tom of Finland's meticulous, eroticized renderings of pumped-up motorcycle jockeys.) And with an array of Fluxus-like ephemera -- gay magazines, broadsheets and posters -- it skims across the last three decades of gay and lesbian subculture, its increasing visibility in American life and its increasing activism in the face of AIDS.

The integration of the individual into society is the organizing principle behind the show's nine chapters, each of which is examined for its sexual, social and formal connotations. The section called Void presents a kind of ground zero of art, sexuality and absence. It moves from the nearly blank paper of Cage's 1952 score for "4' 33"," a work of complete silence, to Judy Chicago's abstraction of the female genitalia to Michael Jenkins's mournful "Snowflakes," a white-on-white work in felt that evokes the silence and beauty of falling snow but whose repeating circles also evoke Kaposi's lesions.

In the section titled Drag, the crucial 80's strategy of appropriation is seen as a form of transvestism in many guises. There's the stringent Conceptualism of Sherrie Levine's photograph "After Walker Evans" -- a re-photograph of Evans's photograph of his son's naked torso, itself reminiscent of idealized Renaissance nudes. There's also Deborah Kass's "Altered Image," a photograph of a woman imitating a man imitating a woman. (It mimics almost exactly the famous photographs of Andy Warhol in heavy makeup, blond wig, tie and jeans that are also in the show.)

Finally there's what might be called Process Art in drag: Robert Gober's "Plywood," a sheet of the stuff that looks manufactured but is handmade. Similar shifts from the direct to the oblique pervade the show, stretching the definition of each chapter and its contents. The Couples section includes Diane Arbus's photograph of two women, "Two Friends at Home, New York City, 1956" but also Jasper Johns's print of his famous ale cans sculpture, which reads here as another same-

sex couple.

This is in many ways a revelatory, ground-breaking show. At first its title simply seems to refer to gay and lesbian artists who have been forced to view themselves, or society as a whole, differently from straight people. By its end, all art is seen in a different light, and, perhaps most profoundly, so is difference itself.

Photos: Catherine Opie's "Self Portrait," right, scratched on the artist's back. (Regen Projects); "Cascade of Devotion," 1932, by Marsden Hartley, above, and "Two Friends at Home, New York City," 1965, by Diane Arbus, left. (University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley)