

By Robert Mahoney

A ROMANTIC DISTANCE

Theme shows that focus on a subject are inherently limited in scope. They usually set up a dichotomy no one believes in anymore anyways and lets artists take potshots at the already dead issue. Curated by Bill Arning of White Columns, "A Romantic Distance" certainly flirts with the obvious, but it has enough sense of humor to make the relationship work. And there's an underlying theme. Once upon a time theorists hoped the "sexist" process of the objectification of women might be rid forever from the human mind. That hope is now either gone, or on probation, at least among the curator's cohorts. Now its "do it to him before he does it to you," : out-sexist the sexist in a cynical battle of the sexes. In this show, the males are somewhat defensive, somber, morbid; the females are laughing through their tears. As a result, the show has the feel of a couple fighting their hundredth fight over the same ground. Such "couple imperialism," which claims importance for this unending trivia, sometimes gets reeeeeeal boring to the unattached.

John Maggioto's *A Memory* (1987) is a sweet piece of antiquated sentiment, a kind of aesthetic valentine in memory of the love of a departed couple. The patina of emulsion distresses the memory with an undercurrent of trouble that the white frame forcibly attempts to ice as holy. Daniel Faust's *Untitled, New York State* is a complex bunkering of love. The heart here in fact shapes a funeral stone, which, inscriptionless, disconnects from the grief that makes the heart and stone one. The disintegration of feeling is furthered by the laminated cibachrome format: set on masonite to salvage some material relation to the stone, romance is pictured here as entombed in a labyrinth of defense mechanisms. Dura Rosenberg's *Untitled* (1986) imprints a not very romantic act on velvet. The imprint of a jacket, in an unreadable position, though softened by velvet, remembers a physical act prompted by decidedly mixed

emotions. John Franklin's *Skin Diver* conflates sex and death in a quite disturbing way. The laid splat wet suit, with its red patch at the heart spot, is a thoroughly condomized creature-from-the-black-lagoon of contemporary sex fears. The placement of an erect bit of plumbing at the crotch describes the false ecstasy involved in the rigor mortis of the drowned. The work has the bitter aftertaste of horseplay that turns by accident into tragedy. Steve Derrickson's *Lissitsky, Lost at Sea* uses the imprint of charcoalized movie stills to keep glamor afloat, but even here, oddly equating love and drowning again, the lovers' embrace is circumscribed by a life-saver buoy, their bodies are cold, suffering exposure, the motives of survival undermine the love, to describe the desparate "nesting" of unlovers in the age of AIDS.

Josie Rosenberg's *Platonic Retreat* is a quite cynical rereading of a quasi-sacred hearted symbol, in which a human dyptych perform an act that, under the cover of a platonism breached, seems psychologically safer. Its not often you see the canvas hymen violated by actual description, and even here, it's a little bit like kissing one's sister. Kathe Burkhart's *I am ashamed of myself (the Elizabeth Taylor Little Women Series)* is a bit much. Blackboard chalk covers the heart of a dated virtue in false guilt. Like the star in question, who married 'em before having affairs with 'em, such work takes two steps backwards to get one ahead—it's not very funny. But Sy Ross' *Lady Luck* (1986) is a funny, animated tribute to fertility and life. A Betty Boop-type bikini-wearer is the totem that keeps the demons away. The demons here are lifted from tatoos or trucks' decals and as such bristle with the broad polarities of sidewalk philosophy. "Don't Gamble with Love" is the motto of women stuck in bad relationships: best to tune out and become a cartoon character. Here too Ross pits a sendup of one stereotype against sendups of another to maintain the compromised happiness of the status quo. (Jeffrey Neale, *January 7-February 6*)