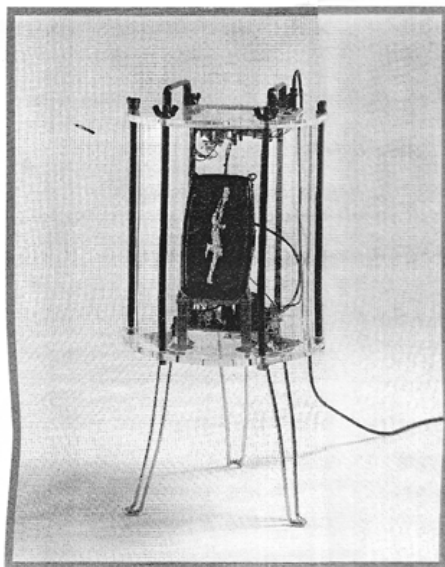


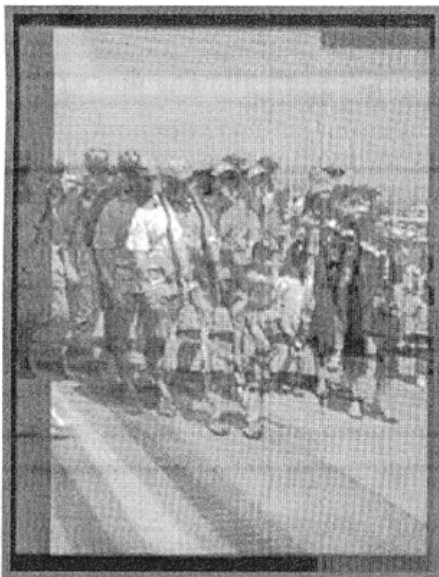
## Northern California

### 'High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids' at Bedford Gallery

It is both a shame and virtue that *High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids: Art in a Digital Age* is up in Walnut Creek. It is a shame because its semi-remote location means that one of the best media arts shows in recent times will



Above: Alan Rath, *Running Man I*, 2001, acrylic, electronics, CRT, 30" x 15" x 15"; below: Rebeca Bollinger, *Family*, 2001, Iris print, 46" x 34", at Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek.



not be seen by a larger audience. Simultaneously, it's shows like these that turn a suburban community art center into a bona fide cultural destination.

*High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids*'s greatest attribute is the presence of a curatorial concept. Despite the recent elevation of new media to blockbuster-worthiness at major museums (as in the Whitney's *Bitstreams*, SFMOMA's *010101*, and efforts by many Ivy League museums to commission and collect Net-based art), the shows we've seen have been largely without curatorial direction. Like these shows, *High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids* includes a roundup of some of the media arts' most prominent artists. However, those represented fall largely outside the nepotistic clique that has plagued the new media community, and their work is present for conceptual reasons that extend beyond the sex appeal-measured popularity contest that has come to be the *raison d'être* for many of the recent shows.

So what is the show's curatorial concept? All of the work represents a meeting of high- and low-tech sensibilities. Some of the work could be described as a high-tech interpretation of vernacular culture, while other pieces are decidedly low tech in their investigation of digital culture. The latter, in fact, seems most successful.

People fell in love with Jim Campbell's LED panels at first sight in the Whitney Biennial this year. The Bedford has eschewed that work and shown pieces from an ongoing series of light box images. Campbell has created "illuminated averages," blurry, individual amalgams of a series of "moving" images. The resulting richly colored images, culled mostly from Hitchcock films, resemble Thomas Ruff's dizzy downloads and give pause to consider how the speed of technology is affecting the pace of interpretation.

Lynn Hershman, the post-'60s pioneer of video and installation art, presents a strong series of negative-format Iris prints of cyborg faces—part human, part machine—literally overwritten by the numbers that label their identities. Hershman is one of a large number of *High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids* artists whose work references the evolution of printing technologies. William Wiley, well-known for signature hand-rendering, is an unlikely candidate for a new media show, but makes an appearance by way of Iris prints of old Wiley paintings, upon which Wiley has drawn and painted. At some point, the emphasis on the type of printer over the quality of

the image resembles glorifying sticks over the carrots they dangle. Enter Rebeca Bollinger who nicely embodies the show's themes with her color portraits spray-painted onto matzo crackers. Bollinger (and a number of her *High Tech/Low Tech Hybrid* peers) might have been better represented by more recent work, but the matzos have secured a place of art-historical importance and are rightly included.

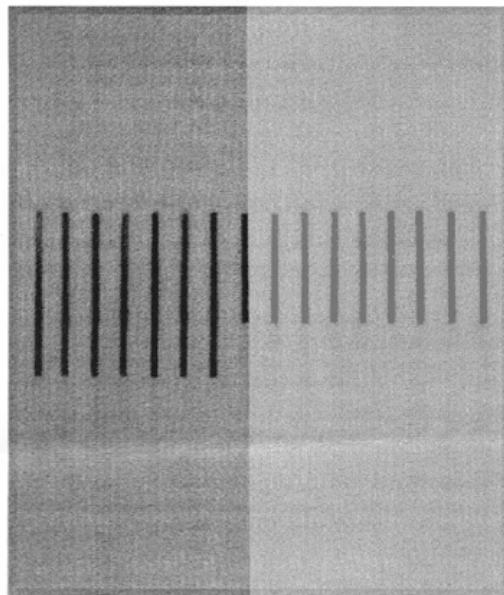
New media, to a large extent, has been ushered into galleries and museums on the backs of photography and video. Two video projects stand out in this show as conceptually and visually compelling. J. D. Beltran shows a polyptych self-portrait, where each of the four pieces has the same dimensions, but are alternately in paint, autobiographical text, plaster cast and video. The video is a loop of morphs from her own face into faces painted by Manet, Warhol, Picasso and others. The piece references Beltran's identity as a painter working in new media, while also considering the many "faces" of any one individual's persona. If function may again follow form, *Please (Self-Portrait)* is among a slough of new work positioning the database as an important new narrative genre.

Bob Linder's untitled video features a plate rocking perilously on the edge of a kitchen counter. The video is manipulated and looped so that it remains impossible in motion, forever rocking. Linder compares the video to a still life, where the plate rocks and the space stands still, and relates this pattern of repetition-inanimation to the "alive and beautifully moving" in his own life. "Repetition is anything but negative," he says, "and as a matter of fact it is necessary and should ... be celebrated." In this sense, Linder embodies the curator's intention, refusing to give in to the art community's demand for something "new," while simultaneously using new technologies to address seasoned subjects and old tools to address the status of life and representation in digital culture.

—Marisa S. Olson

*High Tech/Low Tech Hybrids: Art in a Digital Age* closes June 16 at Bedford Gallery, Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Dr., Walnut Creek.

Marisa S. Olson is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.



Edythe Bresnahan, *Siena Series #6*, 2002, oil, 80" x 74", at Triangle Gallery, San Francisco.

### Edythe Bresnahan at Triangle Gallery

Like those who have chosen a life of religious devotion, artists often feel that their work is something bigger than they are. Other factors, such as money, health and their personal relationships, may be secondary to the path they follow in developing their work. In the Middle Ages, of course, artists frequently were religious scholars—the monks who illuminated the manuscripts used their creative talents in the service of God. Later, opportunities for patronage were to be found in the realm of creating sacred works to be displayed in churches and cathedrals. As secular imagery began to creep in, and patronage by nobility to supplant that of the church, the issue of the blank canvas and what to paint began to emerge.

The idea of a painting as an object for contemplation, and possibly as a vehicle for inducing a spiritual experience, certainly fell out of favor during the latter stages of modernism. Suzi Gablik's 1984 *Has Modernism Failed?* explores a vision of contemporary art as spiritually bereft. Early modernists, however, retained the idea of art as a spiritual quest. Gablik refers to Kazimir Malevich, who "went so far as to claim he saw the face of God in his black square," and Theo van Doesburg, who "declared that 'the square is to us what the cross was to the early Christians.'" She states, "This notion of the artist as the last active carrier of spiritual value in a materialist world remained attached to all abstract art until the end of Abstract

Expressionism." Quoting Mark Rothko: "... the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows ... they are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them."

Gablik continues: "Certainly, much time has been spent during recent decades in denying that art has anything to do with either spiritual or ethical values ... Many of our artists, suffering the repercussions of this desacralized mentality, have pretended for some time now that painting is merely a way of solving formal problems. The total opposition between art and life that formalism proposes exempts art from its moral tasks." It would be difficult to argue that the ensuing decades have shown significant deviation from this predominantly amoral posture. Poised now on the edge of a turbulent new millennium, our post-modernist aesthetic fraying around the edges, can we reconsider the idea of art as filling a spiritual void in our lives?

Edythe Bresnahan's *Oil Paintings 1996-2002* at Triangle Gallery explore a narrowly defined territory in an expansive and satisfying fashion. Bresnahan is the Art Department Chair at Dominican University, an independent Catholic college which serves students from diverse religions and backgrounds. Its "vision of education ... seeks to reconcile seeming opposites: the religious and the secular, individuality and community, the body's potential and the aspirations of the mind and spirit." Its peaceful San Rafael campus offers a calm, contemplative space which relates well to this artist's work which is subtle, elegant and understated. Ranging in size from small, approximately 18-inch square, to quite large, 80 by 76 inches, these abstract works combine elements of line and color in meticulously arranged patterns. They fall into two bodies of work: the *Black Line Series* and the *Siena Series*.

The *Siena Series* includes a number of large canvases, primarily broken up by a regular vertical arrangement of lines or bars. We wonder how much of the title refers to the fleshy burnt pigment, and how much to the medieval city which houses the Lorenzetti murals. *Number 12*, pearly, creamy and muted pink, features seventeen lines. Thin near the top, some lines grow darker and thick, others disappear into a kind of ghost image. Dark stains bleed off the bottom of these elongated forms. The eye is drawn to spots where paint is thinnest, and light reflects off the priming of the canvas. The longer you look at these paintings, the more colors you see. As the edges of shapes fuzz and thin out, sometimes the black stain looks reddish—then the nearby ghost areas start to look green. I begin to wonder how much of what I'm seeing is painted, and how much is really afterimage.

Along with color-field painters such as Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler, we may think of Mondrian's early work

evolving from tree branches to pure geometry. The way the light and dark patterns fall may evoke the black and white keys of a piano, and the way Bresnahan plays with rhythm, repetition, "bars," scale and tone seems to reinforce the musical association. Some of the *Black Line Series*, such as #31, look more organic, like plant stems. In a paradoxical statement, the lines here aren't necessarily black at all, but sometimes painted gray, pink, or white, sometimes the color of the background which shows through. Delicate tracings appear drawn with charcoal pencil. The shiny paint seems very clean; Seductive, creamy surfaces draw and hold our gaze.

This work exists in a quiet space which resonates of thought and spirit. A Zen-like feeling flickers in and out. There is a strong sense of intention behind it, and her subtle awareness of the visual pleasure she is creating for the viewer. In a time when ugliness, brutality and destruction haunt our thoughts, it's refreshing to have an encounter with lucid images which are beautiful and serene.

—Barbara Morris

*Edythe Bresnahan: Oil Paintings 1996-2002* closed May 4 at Triangle Gallery, San Francisco.

Barbara Morris is a freelance writer based in the Bay Area.

## Russell Crotty and Jess von der Ahe at Hosfelt Gallery

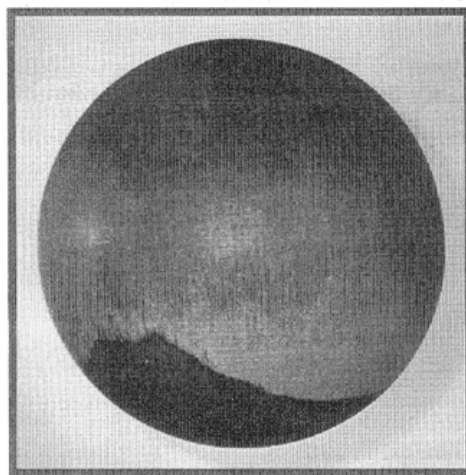
**W**e all sleep under the same moon, but only women

bleed. For the first sentiment I must give credit to a poet friend of mine; I'm not sure who he stole it from (perhaps Copernicus, or Phoebe from "Friends"), but so convincing was his oration late one night in a Lake Tahoe hot tub that I'm still willing to pretend he came up with it on his own. As for the second truism, I learned it from Alice Cooper in 1975, though as a preteen into glam-rock I didn't quite get the meaning of that uncharacteristically heartfelt ballad from the "Welcome to My Nightmare" album. Both phrases rushed back to me without warning at Hosfelt Gallery, where Russell Crotty's drawings of nighttime skies and Jess von der Ahe's menstrual blood paintings provided strangely beautiful visual corollaries to the poet-thief's heavenly pronouncement and Alice's tender (or was it horribly misogynistic?) ode to that time of the month.

Crotty, a seemingly obsessive amateur astronomer, views star clusters, the Veil Nebula in Cygnus and other night-sky phenomena from an observatory in his Malibu backyard. He then jots down observational minutia from his field expeditions, and makes large-scale drawings of the great wide astral open with thousands of tiny pen strokes. Some of these drawings, which must take days and days to complete, are collected in the largest book you've ever seen (approximately 4 by 4 feet), titled

"Notable Observations, Summer Milky Way." Two additional drawings hang on a nearby wall, one captioned in part with the appealing purple-prose farewell, "I say good-bye to the supernova remnants—and delicate treasures of the summer Milky Way."

Viewed as flat drawings in the book or on the wall, Crotty's skies remain earthbound; they only take flight in his orb pieces, for which the painstaking artist has a master Japanese paper-maker attach delicate sheets of paper to large suspended Lucite spheres, which Crotty then draws on in the round. These 360-degree drawings take in the landscape below the night sky as well as the celestial plane above; it's as if you're looking through the other end of the Hubble telescope and seeing the entire universe



Russell Crotty, *Basin and Range*, 2002, ink on paper, on Lucite sphere, 45" dia., at Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco.

within reach. Crotty's got the whole world in his hands, yet his drawings are sufficiently detailed to include satellite dishes, dense forests, the LA basin and swaths of light pollution. Swaying almost imperceptibly in the gallery, Crotty's spheres form their own solar system around which viewers move like unmoored moons.

Moving from the macro view to the microscopic, von der Ahe's specimen-like paintings are otherworldly in their seductive surface appeal; the revelation that those ruby reds and inky pinks stem from the artist's menstrual blood sets up a beguiling attraction-repulsion reaction (though far more the former than the latter, which is really just a momentary blanch). Swirling her blood into eyes, ovals, orifices, nipples, jewels, constellations and doodles, and further embellishing and seducing with gorgeously applied gold leaf and shiny coats of resin, von der Ahe manages to reference medieval icons and the Viennese Secessionists (particularly Klimt) while keeping her works oddly light and airy. It's tempting to contextualize these blood paintings within feminist traditions of body art, but von der Ahe eschews overt politicization in favor of decorative brilliance. She's titled this series *Flutter*, bringing to mind butterfly wings. Now that's a perfect metaphor for Alice Cooper to mess with.

—Steven Jenkins

Recent works by Russell Crotty and Jess von der Ahe closed May 25 at Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco.

Steven Jenkins is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.

Jess von der Ahe, *Untitled (Lady Slipper Down)*, 2002, blood, gold leaf, resin on clayboard, 10" x 8", at Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco.

