NEW YORK

## GREGORY CREWDSON

### LUHRING AUGUSTINE

**Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 1998,** Laser Direct C-print, 50 x 60".

**Muntean/Rosenblum, *Untitled (It is not easy . . .)*, 1999,** acrylic on canvas, 78 x 39".

Gregory Crewdson's new series of staged photographs, "Twilight" (1998–99, all *Untitled*), shows a suburbia run amok. People who can't take the subway to work grow obsessed with the underground, tunneling holes in their living rooms or digging gardens there. Or else they look up at the sky, from whence falls light—whether from the local traffic copter or from a tuneful spaceship out of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, we are not told. Look out your window in Crewdson's Lot and you'll see your pregnant neighbor alone in the street, stripped to her undies to take the cool evening air on her skin. Peek into a garage and you might find a woman building a pyre of flowers higher than her head—perhaps preparing for some fragrant rite of *seppuku*, but again, we can only guess. Natural phenomena catch the eerie mood: When a car engine catches fire, radiance glows not only from under the hood but also out of a storm drain around the corner. Yet for all the photographs' ethereal atmospheres, the characters are sweaty and grimy and scratched, more dazed than entranced. They don't look happy. It is, in Richard Brautigan's phrase, the revenge of the lawn.

It's also disappointingly weak tea. Urban planners have written a lot lately about emergent modes of suburbia in the US, but these aren't Crewdson's interest. Where Steven Spielberg, in *Close Encounters* and other films, made special effects sing by framing them with the detailed clutter of tract-house family life, Crewdson is satisfied with the special effect by itself. In any case, a photograph that looks like a film still has a built-in issue, namely, that it is a photograph that looks like a film still. It presents itself as a particle not only of a larger whole, but of a whole that contains countless other images ranging from the breathtaking to the banal—so why isolate this one in particular? How to put the illusion of the fragment to use? Cindy Sherman, Crewdson's great example, knows how, and Crewdson himself is an example to a little legion of young acolytes at work on the problem. His followers, often likable though seldom as yet truly memorable, have the advantage of seeming to portend some fresh sensibility or identity, and Cindy Sherman has the advantage of being Cindy Sherman. Crewdson has it tougher: Applying Hollywood-like devices to supposedly more thoughtful effect, he succeeds only in reminding you that a film director must invent and oversee literally thousands of such images to fill the allotted ninety minutes and still can end up with a mediocre movie.

Crewdson did better in David Lynch mode than he does in Steven Spielberg mode; his late-'80s bug's-eye views of a nature as natural as Astroturf had the look of Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and seemed to mine the same vein of artifice. Lynch used an obviously mechanical chirping robin as a sign of hope and joked about the already blatant Freudian subtexts in his tale of sexual perversity by naming an apartment building the Deep River. In those days neither he nor Crewdson had any depth—rather than make you decipher a Jamesian figure in the carpet, they did the decoding for you, draining their symbols of mystery and slapping them down like dead fish. The strategy, paradoxically, made overused images weirdly vibrant. Perhaps it was an approach that couldn't last—perhaps the artists found that those images rapidly began to look overused again. Crewdson's solution is to run back to enigma like a lapsed Catholic rediscovering the Church. But his mysteries pose no interesting questions, and to feel them you have to have faith.

*—David Frankel*

## MUNTEAN/ ROSENBLUM

### JACK TILTON GALLERY

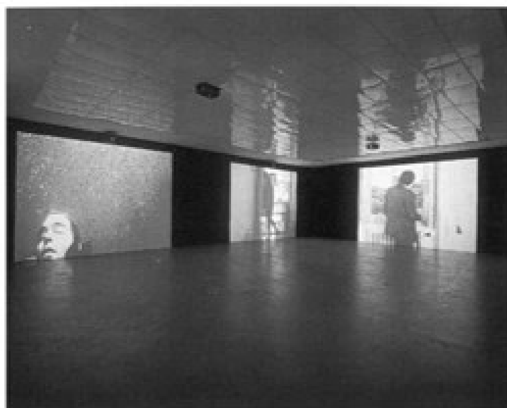
Recently I met with a well-scrubbed guy in a bright-blue shirt who had a shiny new pencil, also blue, tucked jauntily behind his ear. Something about him struck me as odd, and later I realized that he was mimicking, albeit in a different color, the pink-shirted and be-penciled Banana Republic model then appearing on bus shelters all over the city. Of course it's obvious that we're awash in a sea of images that dictate how we look, act, and think (though most of us don't take the cues so literally), and it's equally obvious that these images are mostly shallow, bereft of meaning. Muntean/Rosenblum rather soberly accept this status quo as the starting point in their work, appropriating material from a panoply of fashion and lifestyle magazines, homing in on comely youths posing moodily in trendy clothing—patterned shifts, cargo pants, and the latest sneaker and T-shirt styles.

The Austrian duo's paintings and comic books (they also produce performances, sculpture, and photographs incorporating the two) transplant their models into various urban and suburban settings or bland interiors. The compositions are consistently rounded at the corners like the frames of certain cartoons (or TV and computer screens), with a resulting white margin for a caption at the bottom. Their style—or brand, if you will—brings to mind Raymond Pettibon's philosophical musings and Karen Kilimnik's obsession with the fashion-conscious zeitgeist. Muntean/Rosenblum, however, are determined to wring a little substance from this surfeit of style—to uncover some soul in spiffy Banana Republicans and other supremely self-aware young urbanites.

The text in these works, appropriated from magazines and books, consists of ruminative nuggets ("Trust is a word we have to put too much trust in"; "Misery does not want company—happiness does") that may resonate or stand at odds with the image they caption. Either way they provide a sign of consciousness or even conscience behind Muntean/Rosenblum's model army, who seem a little lost when removed from their glossy contexts. The narrative in the comic book *Here It Is*, 2000, is a chain of cryptic declarations ("Here is what happened . . . and yet what did happen? Nothing to speak of . . . there are no moments, only the seamless drift; . . . flux and flow, unstoppable, that's all there is . . .") that could serve as a spacey account of surfing twenty-first-century culture.

Muntean/Rosenblum also construct a spare symbolism of sorts. A white light switch and a black heavy-duty stereo speaker bracket a mixed-race couple at a party in *Untitled (The Hardest Thing . . .)*, 1999, perhaps hinting at some dynamic in their relationship. Given the caption in *Untitled (It is not easy . . .)*, 1999 ("It is not easy for handsome people to be themselves, or even try to be"), it seems that the shadow of a boxers-and-socks-clad youth might stand in for his "true" self behind the fetching facade. If this seems a little glib, remember that Muntean/Rosenblum's subjects are the MTV generation, not intellectuals weaned on French theory. More complex is the center spread in *Here It Is*, which borrows equally from *i-D* magazine and Piero della Francesca—not just in the clumsy-yet-lyrical religiosity of the subjects' poses (hands extended in

**Catherine Opie, *Emily, Sts, & Becky, Durham, North Carolina*, 1998,** Chromogenic print, 40 x 50".



**Ugo Rondinone, *It's late and the wind carries a faint sound . . .* (detail), 1999–2000,** six DVD projections and sound track, dimensions variable. Installation view.

benediction or clasped in prayer-like contemplation) and their gorgeously frosty remove, but also in the crisp blue sky and slim trees. Doggedly coaxing the spiritual from the superficial, Muntean/Rosenblum seem especially fond of saplings and houseplants, whose tenderness and vulnerability perhaps echo that of their nubile human counterparts.

By giving highly processed images a handmade patina via painting, Muntean/Rosenblum are conducting an introspective form of subversion through seduction—an appropriate strategy right now, in what seems to be the endgame in the quest for cool. At this moment, when earnestness and irony can easily flip-flop, it wouldn't be surprising to see the artists' comics among the ever-changing wares down at the local Urban Outfitters.

—*Julie Caniglia*

## CATHERINE OPIE

### GORNEY BRAVIN + LEE

In one of Catherine Opie's best-known photographs, an unsettling 1993 self-portrait, a scene of two stick-figure women standing next to a little house under a puffy cloud has been scratched into the skin of the artist's back. The image of the body with its reddish cicatrix suggests a compelling ambivalence between domestic bliss and self-wounding. For her latest series, it is as though Opie blew up the scarified scenario to life size and animated it. Over a three-year period (1995–98), she visited lesbian acquaintances around the country and photographed them at home doing everyday things. Michelle and Melissa are pictured amid clothes and household goods at their garage sale in Los Angeles; Kristopher and Clara hold hands in two matching yellow rocking chairs in a backyard in Tulsa; Joanne and Betsy pose stiffly in their suburban New York den with their daughter Olivia, who holds a toy pony; Emily, "Sts," and Becky eat food out of plastic containers in their communal Durham, North Carolina, kitchen. By calling the suite of photographs "Domestic," Opie seems to suggest that at issue is both a sense of being at home and a certain domestication or taming.

Opie documents with tender clarity the ordinariness of American lesbian family life: the intimacy, the small kernels of joy, the tedium, and above all, the awkwardness. Viewers, even conservative "family values" advocates, can look at these people—young and midlife, svelte and fat, white and black, rural and urban, poor and middle class, sometimes pictured with their natural or adopted children—and recognize themselves, not so much as they might like to be seen, but as they are. Opie is interested in how communities are formed: in part through sexual expression, of course, but also through repeated gestures, through what is sometimes optimistically called the politics of everyday life. The series amply illustrates how the body informs the domestic and vice versa.

Yet the most memorable photographs convey a strong sense of dislocation rather than interpersonal connection. In the foreground of one of the pictures, a low-ceilinged suburban room screams claustrophobia and boredom, contradicting the happy pose of the lesbian couple in the background. Best of all are the still lifes, in which Opie captures significant details from the inhabitants' rooms: a child's colorful plastic dollhouse crammed with toys; a corner of a bed covered by a dreary patterned bedspread, and beyond it a rural vista viewed through the window; a charming note left by Sts imploring her "anarchist" housemates to do the dishes. Each of these photographs tells a poignant story of exquisitely mundane pain.

—*Nico Israel*

## UGO RONDINONE

### MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Ugo Rondinone's solo New York debut looked like a group show, and I suspect that's just how he likes it. There was nothing here to suggest that the Swiss artist wants to define a single identity for himself or a common thread through his multifarious endeavors—not that he needs to. But every group show is liable to betray notable imbalances of quality from work to work, and that's true even when the "group" happens to be one artist.

Of the five distinct Rondinones in this exhibition, one contributed three very large tondo paintings (all works 1999–2000 or 2000): concentric bands of color à la Kenneth Noland but executed with a spray gun so that the circles look blurred, out of focus. From a certain distance the works are intense and punchy and quite flat. As you get closer, they become less graspable and at the same time begin to generate the illusion of being convex. Everyone who writes about these paintings calls them "woozy," and I will, too.

A second Rondinone showed a suite of sixty drawings, most of which consisted exclusively of handwritten text—a sort of underground comics in which the story has practically shut out the visuals. The narrator, apparently a woman, describes the breakup of a dismal love affair while ruminating on a report of another woman who as a psychological experiment spent a year alone in a cave ("actually it was a subterranean room with walls, light, and a generator") and then committed suicide on returning to the world. Interspersed with the pages of text were seemingly unrelated images of landscapes and, oddly enough, of floating ashtrays.

The third artist presented a six-channel black-and-white video installation in a room filled with purplish light emanating from the ceiling. In the slowed-down images, reminiscent of Italian art films of the '60s (Antonioni, Pasolini), people perform simple, repetitive actions: A man swims; another walks past a brick wall; one woman dances; a second, nude, urgently tears a big sheet of paper off a wall, etc. All this was accompanied by ethereal, druggily sluggish rock music in the manner of the Bristol-based band Flying Saucer Attack. The half-buried vocal was a single line repeated over and over, something that sounded like "Let me taste sunshine," although I'm told it was really, more prosaically, "Every day sunshine." Curiously, this work's extravagantly long title (beginning with the phrase *It's late and the wind carries a faint sound*) reads like an excerpt from the drawings' diaristic narrative.

The least engaging Rondinone, number four, contributed five black-and-white photographs of S&M gear; the last and most elusive, a single work consisting of tinted plastic sheets covering the glass panes of the gallery's garage-door facade—an effort to color the outside world with the motley tones of the show inside, perhaps.

What brings these disparate works together? A cultivation of mood for its own sake, I'd say, embodied in a strange conflation of reticence with melodrama; and the mannerism by which reminiscences of familiar stylistic tropes are reclaimed and recombined. Above all, a sort of nostalgia for alienation. The trippy feeling that permeates much of Rondinone's output also characterizes the work of his compatriot Pipilotti Rist, but whereas she tends to throw everything together, Rondinone compartmentalizes—a strangely analytical approach to dreaminess.

—*Barry Schwabsky*