

ArtReview

March 2008, pp.96-97

FUTURE GREATS



Sara VanDerBeek by Joshua Mack

Sara VanDerBeek infuses the increasingly common, synthetic pursuit of appropriation – work usually explained by heavy rhetoric – with profoundly personal, formal, conceptual and historic resonance, evincing a sophistication and maturity uncommon in a thirty-one-year-old. To make her pieces, she constructs, and then photographs, small sculptures and collages from found images and objects, teasing complex skeins of meaning from associative combinations.

Take *Decorations in a Notebook*, 2006. Here she mounted an illustration of Picasso's skull-like 1943 bronze, *Death's Head*; a photograph of a Vietcong guerrilla; a single, disembodied eye (it happens to be Liz Taylor's); and a semicircular sheaf of folded paper on an armature made of wooden struts and blocks. A small Associated Press item, after which the piece is titled, obscures the lower part of the soldier's face and explains that he decorated the photo with stars, the symbol of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. It was found in a notebook on his corpse.

The work's structure recalls constructivist sculpture and a kind of 1950s aesthetic, à la Louise Nevelson, while its lugubrious lighting, which plays off that in the image of the Picasso, hints at surrealist photography. But it's the play between the Picasso's hollow sockets, Liz's floating eye and the bright gaze of the Vietcong that creates poetic resonance, linking war, death, commemoration and the human need to connect with others by seeing and being seen. That such meaning is created through references to past wars comments on the present. But more importantly, the combinations signal that our understanding of images is malleable, personal and contextual. Thus VanDerBeek raises issues of subjectivity and of the passage of time, suggesting that the fourth dimension plays a role in work which plays with photography – two dimensions – and sculpture – three.

VanDerBeek draws her material from an archive collected in forays to antique shops and flea markets. A few images, such as the AP news clip, come from the files of her late father, the experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, who died in 1984, when she was seven. His collages and his use of multiple projectors in screenings inform her interest in combining images. But her sensitivity to the potential of visual material to bear meaning stems from her efforts to know her father through his archives. The sense of loss and absence which pervades *Decorations in a Notebook* reflects, perhaps, her realization that photographs can memorialise but can never make the lost one tangible.

From top: *Dissecting Picasso*, 2006, digital c-print, 76 x 102 cm, artist's label, edition of 3 + 2AP; *Eustachy*, 2007, digital c-print, 41 x 51 cm, artist's label, edition of 3 + 2AP; *Decorations in a Notebook*, 2007, digital c-print, 76 x 102 cm, artist's label, edition of 3 + 2AP; facing page: *Decorations in a Notebook*, 2006, digital c-print, 61 x 51 cm, artist's label, edition of 3 + 2AP. All works: courtesy the artist and D'Amelio Torres, New York

ALTMAN SIEGEL

GALLERY S/F

49 GEARY ST, STE. 416 [4th floor] SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94108
tel: 415.576.9300 fax: 415.373.4471 // // // // // ALTMAN SIEGEL.COM

