

Tiny Miracles

The anthropological art of Polaroid photographs

By JUSTIN EDWARD COFFEE

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"Lincoln" by Naida Osline

The Office, an Art Space (the magic mushroom amid industrial-park cow shit) is now showing exhibits by two area artists centering on the tiny miracle of Polaroid film. Naida Osline began compiling "The Captiva Collection" while she was public events supervisor for Huntington Beach. Her six-year project involves simple head-on or profile shots of people she encountered in public, all of them in some sort of costume or outlandish dress. But since the pics are only shoulders-up, and the subjects told to assume a neutral expression (generally), each has the quality of evidence catalogued by a cultural anthropologist. Osline admits as much in the show's accompanying essay: that they are "images taken for reasons other than art." The art, therefore, must lie within the presentation of the photographs. Polaroids are by nature square and identical in size, and to underscore this, each is mounted in an identical black frame with a generous white matte. Osline has arranged them into rough groupings and has given them only cursory titles for the sake of identification. For example, the five-shot "Head

Wound" series contains a zombie and a man with two ends of an oversized screw protruding from his forehead. One poor character appears to sport a genuine deep and bloody gash atop his head, though covered modestly by a huge, blue bandage. There's a "Women With Flowers on Head" series (self-explanatory), and a "Fuzzy Accoutrements" series (including a very round Cruella de Vil, as well as a Joan Didion look-alike under an enormous furry yellow hat, holding a profoundly disinterested Pekeapoo in frame). The most engaging groups to compare are the Elvis and Lincoln series. Osline explores the "representations" of people: how a pair of outsized shades, a stack of blue-black hair and curled lip give you Instant Elvis (just add water!), while a black stovepipe hat, Amish beard and suit imply our 16th president. (The parade of Elvises is a truly multi-culti troupe, but the Abes all fall on the Caucasian end of the spectrum. Witness therein the difference between an American *icon* and an *American* icon.)

Tucked in the Office's Project Room is the far grittier photography of Long Beach artist Jenna Gallemore. Her Polaroids capture scenes of alternating starkness and beauty, mounted directly to the bare walls, no use for frames. A few shots sport captions scrawled on the lower border, as in *BARE*, a naked female torso, arms folded over breasts, clutching a pink rose, or *FREEDOM*, one of the artist herself, her head rising barely into frame, with a tear of masking tape overlaying where her mouth would be. Her approach to creating images is quite literally visceral—separating the film's plastic layers and manipulating the emulsion in between to realize alien colors and simulate multiple exposures. Gallemore deals in her own sort of street anthropology, an unblinking record of a cement world graffitied and then rolled over.

Wikipedia tells us that Polaroid film is, on average, 10 times as expensive per exposure than traditional 35mm and the price is only going up. Unlike 35mm, there's no negative, so each is the sole record of a special slice of time and space. Small magics, in a medium of choice that's gone the way of the daguerreotype.

"The Captiva Collection: Polaroids by Naida Osline" and works by Jenna Gallemore at The Office: An Art Space, 5122 Bolsa Ave., Ste 110, Huntington Beach, (714) 767-5861. Open Tues.-Fri., 1-5 p.m. Free