

# George Kimmerling & Deborah Stratman

at Momena Art

reviewed by Suzanne Wise

Works by George Kimmerling and Deborah Stratman on view at Momena Art through February 3, 2003, explore what's on everyone's mind these days: Violence. Not the grand-scale horror of terrorist acts against the state but the close-to-home everyday violence that take place in schoolyards and suburban neighborhoods. This is the violence no one wants to talk about, that seeps insidiously into our nightmares as well as our waking conceptions of our selves as individuals and in community. Using reproduced newspaper clippings, Kimmerling creates a mosaic of fractured true-life stories about violence done to young boys by men while Stratman employs film to portray a more generic, middle class fear of attack on self and property by an unknown other.

Much of Stratman's 33-minute film "In Order Not To Be Here" is composed of murky footage of suburban locales emptied of humanity. We look through windows into the innards of stores and lobbies of office buildings and ATM terminals. We look at a cowering house, rooftop peaking over a fence. We look at parked, windshield-darkened cars. We look at an empty parking lot. We look at a stone or brick wall protecting something we can't see. We look at a lit-up glassed-in space filled with brightly colored somethings.

Or rather, we don't look. It is the camera that looks and records and we accept its findings. Over-riding darkness, close cropping and mild distortions remind us of the medium that is the master of this story. And the camera is a narrator that can't be relied on for legibility, let alone veracity.

The surveillance camera itself is presented in Stratman's film as a kind of character—or at least an omnipresent power. In one sequence, a surveillance camera slowly, painstakingly swivels its head. In the next sequence, we see what the camera sees: part of an empty lobby of some bank-like space. In the next sequence, we see a guard sitting before 20 surveillance screens, each gray, muted and abstract. The surveillance camera's gaze, or rather the results of its gaze—the film footage—should provide a feeling of protectiveness. We should be able to know for sure if an outsider is breaking in, doing wrong, taking our stuff. Instead, what is revealed is limited and requiring subjective interpretation.

What is not revealed at all by Stratman is any evidence of a criminal act. "In Order Not to Be Here" provides us with potential crime scenes before the crime occurs, and in a few cases the pursuit of the accused after a crime has presumably been committed. Actual or alleged violence takes place outside the frame of the camera. In this way, the camera captures for us a world that lives in expectation of a violence that will spring miraculously out of thin air, without reason. And the air is thick with unconsummated, never-ending suspense.

The sound track heightens suspense with its thudding heartbeat; pulsing, trance-y electronic music; and CB radio mutterings in which I heard a smattering of ominous words such as "suspect," "exchange of gun fire," "engulfed in flames." Add the night-

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soaked shadows this film lives in and you've got some post-mod kind of Film Noir. Film noir with an overdose of noir and without redemptive chiaroscuro.

Which is not to say there is no light in this night world. There is the fuzzed glow of streetlights, billboards, headlights, and spotlights. (One oracular billboard, advertising a national department store chain in bloated primary colors, suggests the motto of either the Homeland Securities chief or the ultimate uber-criminal: "TARGET Everyland"). But it is a blare of brightness that often disorients instead of sharpening and clarifying the boundaries between Things. For example, distant gun-wielding men and a dog, reduced to white spotty silhouettes, circle around and through a cloud of whiteness (a visual distortion of a spotlight perhaps) while a voice from a radio directs the pursuers toward their object – a lone human. In another scene, an underlying anxiety, restlessness and even rage seem to be revealed in the way light agitates in a scratch-filled pattern across a bench or a curb. White lines chomping out of the dark become the snapping jaws of a dog straining at his leash.

The climactic scene of the film is familiar to us from Hollywood action movies—an escapee desperately fleeing. But the familiar scene is broken down into a strange and slippery alien land, awash in green. A green man with brilliant white hair drags a white shadow through a green city that has been flatten into illusionist planes. Sidewalks turn out to be rooftops and visa versa. He runs across a green highway, over green fields, over a green bridge and flings himself into green water. The camera loses sight of him in a craggy textured waterfall of green and white then recovers him pushing through a body of green water. Is he swimming to his death? Is he escaping?

More to the point should be: Who is this man? Did he commit a crime? Is he innocent? Is he someone I know? Like a dog pulling at its leash, we as privileged viewers want an object to sink our teeth into, an object whose capture will put our fears (our anxiety about having stuff—cars, homes, businesses, money in bank accounts—in proximity to those who have not: we could be robbed or killed for what we hoard) to rest. Of course, we also want him to escape. And that's when we fantasize ourselves into his fleeing body.

Kimmerling's half of the show, entitled "Clipped," gives faces and names to a vast array of bad men and the boys they abuse (and the boys abused boys abuse). Clips of newspaper articles and digital prints of photographs from newspapers from the last four years (though dates are not given) tell tales of molestation, murder, child abuse, suicide, sports team hazings, cannibalism and other horrors.

Each text bit and each photograph appears on its own differently colored placard. Thus words and images are given equal status. The effect is of a vast array of family photos. These boys and men are related by the culture of male violence that permeates prep and public school, sports teams, places of worship, and neighborhoods in suburbs and cities.

One subplot that recurs throughout the news articles is the knowledge of neighbors, colleagues and classmates about abuse or the potential for abuse. The acceptance of aggressive behavior – such as the grabbing of genitals at Groton prep school as a form of greeting – is a common occurrence. Until that behavior transmutes into an act of undeniable horror: in a graduation speech, a senior at Groton reveals his freshman-year rape by fellow students. Kimmerling also makes causal connections, by way of

composition, between child abuse and child violence against other children: Stories of violence against boys are found amidst stories of boy perpetrators of crimes and abuse.

The digital prints that accompany the texts are easy to read as representative of sexual and physical violence. Two male bodies float deadly beneath the surface of water. A shirtless little boy sporting rippling adult muscles (surely the result of Photoshop) holds a large sword above his very short shorts. A photo of an accused child abuser (appropriately crazed-looking) is paired with that of a missing child, each identified by a newspaper caption.

Other photographs become ominous because of their proximity to the terrifying stories in the newspaper clippings. A lone waif stares shyly into the camera. A Tibetan kid, surrounded by Tibetan men, greets a man who looks suspiciously like the Dalai Lama. A shirtless teen with a crew cut and a thick chain necklace glares dazedly from the back seat of car; is he violator or violated? Another shirtless youth sits beside him, staring out the opposite window. 17-year-old John Lee Malvo and John Allen Muhammad, the car snipers who killed 13 people last year, grin handsomely at the camera, their arms around each other. The sweet sits next to the sinister in these portraits of male camaraderie.

Likewise certain acts of mysterious violence take on an added anguish when surrounded by so many stories of sexual and physical abuse. A man kills himself by standing in front of a moving train. A murdered priest is discovered. A young boy leaps out of a window because he dreams his parents are being murdered. As a reader of these bits, we fill in the blanks. What drives a man to put himself in front of a moving train? A boy to jump out a window? We can only too easily imagine.

The simple, honoring presentation of these awful truths gives the tabloid reportage a gravity that the clippings' brevity and sensationalist style robs from reality.

Accompanying the clips from newspapers are a handful drawings of such vintage comic book characters as Johnny Quest, as well as drawings based on love notes written by the real-life Alex King, a sexually abused 12-year-old, about Ricky Chavis, his abuser and the accused murderer of his father. The notes were used as evidence at the murder trial. (Alex and his brother Derrick were convicted of the murder.) While the comic book characters and the notebook drawings expand the terrain of male inter-generational relations to include stories of fantasy, adventure and love (and fantasizing about love) even in the midst of horrible abuses of power, these other works feels vestigial of larger projects that are not evident in the gallery show. Or at least, next to the very codified presentation of the newspaper articles and photographs, which consists of more than 80 separate pieces, the drawings have a tacked-on presence.

A photograph taken of footage from a surveillance camera nicely ties Kimmerling's work to Stratman's. The blurred image of a man holding a child's hand resonates with the expectant empty spaces of Stratman's parking lots and sidewalks. The abduction of the boy hasn't happened yet.

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