

Something Fishy

On looking at a photograph by Robert Heinecken. . .

Bill Jay

In a recent tome about philosophical/psychological alternatives propounded by the major thinkers of history, the author expended thousands of words in much earnest wringing-of-hands about The Reason For it All. He impressed me greatly with his conclusion: "there is something fishy about human existence. "

Trawling around in these murky depths is Robert Heinecken. And what he catches, and offers for our consumption, is redolent of fishiness. This is particularly true in the series Recto/Verso when seemingly random conjunctions of unpredictable factors so consistently create recognizable, and significant, images out of chaotic elements.

Now and again, others have landed similar images by a fluke. There was a bit of a flap a few months ago when a local woman was startled to see Jesus' face emerging from a frying taco shell. The taco was consecrated, not consumed, and the image became a shrine to hundreds of pilgrims. And if I remember right, Elvis recently appeared in the mold on an old refrigerator. But my favorite example is an uncited newspaper clipping pinned up over the xerox machine in our art department. A likeness of a patron saint has miraculously appeared on the scrotum of a fifteen year old Italian. (The account included a photograph of the scrotum image, so it must be true). Pilgrims are flocking to the house which God has blessed, where the boy, Giuseppe, displays his holy scrotum through a hole in a screen. Giuseppe is philosophical about God's visitation: "The Lord has picked my testicles to do his work," he says, "I wish he had picked my friend Arturo's, but that's life. " It sure is. As Woody Allen said "... the Cartesian dictum 'I think, therefore I am' might be better expressed 'Hey, there goes Edna with a saxophone.'" Image is more interesting than abstraction.

Both Robert and Giuseppe share a faith in possibilities; the difference between them, however, is not of kind but of consistency. Heinecken seems to have a

psychic resonance with these residual images which become even more significant because of their frequency and degrees of latency. As he has said: "I have the feeling that there are things happening that are really very interesting things, if we can somehow find the key that makes them visible. "

I cannot find an image of Jesus, Elvis or even a common Saint in the particular Recto/Verso assigned to me - but there are plenty of other fishy things going on. I squint, revolve the page, and all sorts of latent images are brain developed. There's a squatting nude, grinning typographical teeth, vomiting a sub sandwich (ham and cheese by the look of it) into a gaping maw, the lips pulled apart by a giant's limbs; directing the flow is a Barbie doll in sunglasses displaying provocatively enlarged breasts. A slight turn and there's a voodoo mask chomping on a severed leg. Turn again and puckered ruby lips have opened to accept a glowing cigar butt. A further turn and a graceful swan's head is thrusting its beak between ivory thighs. And so on. . .

These "interpretations" are no less there than the more overt surface manifestations. As has been pointed out already, the title piece of "Are You Rea?" not only includes the anagrams ARE and REA but also suggests ERA, both for the time in which we live and the Equal Rights Amendment. There is also Rea . . . as "Real" or "Ready," (or even "Reagan") when the trigger is a woman holding open her blouse. I can never see this title without associating "You Rea" with "Eureka", a cry of discovery.

If Robert Heinecken can dredge the photograms of magazine pages for so many strange, beguiling and even meaningful associations and images, the question becomes one of chance or coincidence. I am referring, of course, to the hoary analogy of a particularly obsessed monkey eventually typing a Shakespeare play. Equating the artist with a monkey (even one as tenacious as this) seems rather insensitive, like Tammy Faye Bakker interviewing an armless woman on The PTL Club and asking, "Well, how do you put on your makeup?" I feel justified in posing the above, similarly impertinent, question because I have a point to make which, to me, strikes at the essence of the Recto/Verso series.

In order to make the point I must first introduce a man with the appropriately photographic name of Kammerer. Paul Kammerer was an Austrian biologist whose professional passion was the proving of the Lamarckian theory of evolution. (He shot himself when it was discovered that his prize specimen, the so-called

"midwife toad," had been tampered with to fake the evidence). Kammerer's avocation, outside biology, was his conviction that apparent single coincidences are merely tips of the iceberg which happen to catch our attention. In other words, he reverses the skeptic's argument that out of a myriad of random events we only select those which seem significant. To Kammerer, "coincidences" are the rule, not the exception. He believed that there is an as-yet undiscovered law which clusters non-causal concurrencies into significant lumps. This, to Kammerer, "is a simple empirical fact which has to be accepted and which cannot be explained by coincidence - or rather, which makes coincidence rule to such an extent that the concept of coincidence itself is negated. "

In a beautiful analogy, Kammerer likened this force to a "cosmic kaleidoscope" which, in spite of constant shufflings and random rearrangements, also takes care to bring like and like together - and to create recognizable, and relevant, juxtapositions by chance, as in the Recto/Verso series.

We may be condemned, because of our humanness, to play the role of "Peeping Toms at the keyhole of eternity," as Koestler says in a similar analogy, but Robert Heinecken has removed the stuffing out of the hole, giving us a clearer look at even our limited view. What Heinecken states as his interest in "residual reality" bears an uncanny resemblance to Kammerer's "seriality" (and, it might be added, to Jung's "synchronicity" and Pauli's "exclusion principle" and Hardy's "psychic blueprint" and so on). Unfortunately such terms sound pretentious, as if the idea was too difficult for non-specialists. As Goethe put it: "When the mind is at sea, a new word provides a raft In fact, the principle is simple, if heretical.

What Robert Heinecken reveals in his series Recto/Verso is that the explanation of coincidence just will not wash, that underlying such randomness is a remarkable symmetry as if Something was trying to tell us something. And that is not only "bloody fishy" it is also the meaning of art.

To accompany his portfolio, Recto/Verso, Robert Heinecken invited several critics to respond to an image which he selected. This was my contribution. Recto/Verso was published in 1988.