

# ARTnews

MAY 2009

## How to Look at Art



**Decoding Tibetan Portraits**

**Laughing at Video Art**

**Unlocking the Secrets of an Egyptian Tomb**



such as *Moe West (Lake Eden)*, North Carolina, Black Mountain College (1946), in which a tree line and its reflection suggest a voluptuous female form. A study of Buckminster Fuller's hands conveys a sense of humanity with surprising expressiveness. And she demonstrates a street canniness in a couple of lyrical Depression-era prints of a decidedly unlyrical New York City trench with the two workers who dug it out. In these, and others, Nancy's images are a revelation.

—Tom Collins

## Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art  
Kansas City, Missouri

Working as a team, husband and wife Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison bridge the realms of photography and performance in works that are startling, fanciful,



Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, *Pollination*, 1998, gelatin silver print with mixed media, 36" x 47". Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

and often laugh-out-loud funny. In "Restoration," an exhibition of 15 prints by the couple, dating from 1998 to 2007, Robert posed as a mythic character, Everyman, who struggles with the forces of nature while carrying out impossible tasks: clearing huge piles of debris from a dreary planet, creating new types of vegetation, building ludicrous contraptions that might allow him to fly. Dressed in a shabby suit and tie, he wields a giant wrench to tighten bolts beneath the earth's surface, and he toils with other outsize tools that don't seem to work. *Kingdom* (2000) shows him climbing atop a huge mossy ball propped up on sticks,

pushing a seedling into its surface. In *Pollination* (1998), he clings to the stalk of an enormous dandelion and blows the creepy jumbo seedlings into the murky air.

The events seem to take place in a barren postapocalyptic world, and the laborious process by which the prints are made—using large paper negatives and layers of varnish or beeswax—compounds the sense of otherworldliness. Occasionally the ParkeHarrisons turn to color, as in *Mourning Cloak* (2006), which shows a half-naked central figure surrounded by a swarm

of brightly colored butterflies. There is an engagingly cinematic quality to the team's photos, as though they were stills from early Surrealist films, but their esthetic also evokes the fantastical visions of certain late-19th-century painters and printmakers, such as Odilon Redon and Max Klinger.

Clearly the ParkeHarrisons have environmental concerns at the heart of their projects, but their execution never comes off as heavy-

handed or tendentious. Everyman seems to be having too much fun mending a tired planet; he is more Buster Keaton than Al Gore.

—Ann Landi

## Silvia Levenson

Bullseye  
Portland, Oregon

Silvia Levenson's show "It's Not Living Alone . . ." consisted of kiln-cast glass, photographs, and modified Ikea furniture in installations to convey the fragility and danger lurking beneath a family unit's cozy facade. As in a forensic inquiry, the



Silvia Levenson, *It's Just a Game*, 2008 (left), kiln-cast glass and wood, 5" x 9 1/2" x 8 1/2"; *Caramelle dagli Sconosciuti (Lollies from Strangers)*, 2008, kiln-formed glass, kiln-cast glass, metal, lamp, dimensions variable. Bullseye.

works examined the harrowing legacy of family dysfunction and the ways in which the past haunts the present.

In the "Album di Famiglia" series (2008), she coated black-and-white family photos with an armorlike glass overlay, then painted red forms emerging from the heads of her parents, her sister, and herself. These forms could be read as vegetal sproutings or flames, suggesting that the bonds that nurture growth in early life can ignite the psyche as neuroses take hold. Also juxtaposing ideas of innocence and corruption were toys in the shape of gnomes and Disney characters set next to *Camouflage II* (2008), in which 16 pastel-colored hand grenades sit in shadow boxes behind glass panes etched with the word for "love" in different languages.

By altering an Ikea easy chair, pillow, ottoman, and floor lamp with overlays of hard glass tiles stitched together with sharp wires sticking up like porcupine quills, Levenson undermined the notion of easy-to-acquire, ready-made domesticity. This was no cushy cocoon; this was home as a Scandinavian-designed hell.

In *Life Strategies* (2007) Levenson took aim at the use of mood-elevating drugs as a balm for the wounds of childhood. Mixing its floor tiles inscribed with the brand names of antidepressants and a droll video projection of a housewife on the verge of alcoholic and pharmacologic meltdown, the piece dramatized the enduring escapist power of what used to be called "mother's little helper."

—Richard Speer