

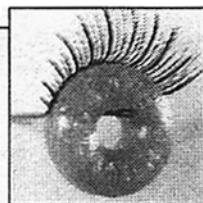
For your eyes only

'Stirred Not Shaken':

Refusalon show is aesthetic espionage

Spirit of James Bond
pervades Refusalon's
'Shaken not Stirred.'

page 41



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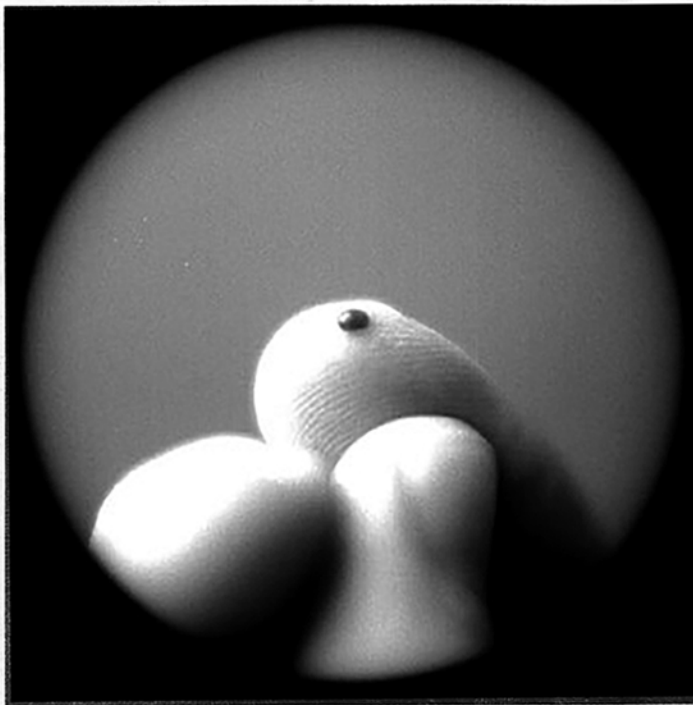
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by Steven Jenkins

Martinis, high-speed chases, and supermodels with little acting talent and less clothing are nowhere to be found at Refusalon, but like the classic James Bond flicks that have inspired the gallery's new group exhibition *Stirred Not Shaken*, there are snazzy gadgets, suspenseful plot twists, cheeky innuendo, and a few secret-agent thrills. Wreaking linguistic havoc on 007's trademark aperitif, *Stirred Not Shaken* is a surprising Molotov cocktail of a show, mixed with equal measures of humor and horror, and topped with a tangy postmodern olive. Intelligently curated with a flair for the subversive by Permi K. Gill, the exhibition features recent work by 22 California artists whose disparate materials and concerns are deftly manipulated in acts of aesthetic espionage. And because things are not always what they may at first seem, the exhibition establishes an unsettling attraction/repulsion dichotomy that keeps viewers on the lookout for Dr. No.

There's a whole lot of stuff in *Stirred Not Shaken*, yet curator Gill has grouped together mixed-media pieces to stress thematic and stylistic links. Many works address physical entrapment. Near the entrance, Martha Schlitt has constructed a brick wall painted the same white color as the gallery walls; it is both a continuation and an interruption of the space, and the occasional gaps between bricks offer dim yet tantalizing views of an alcove to which we are barred entry. Of course, we want what we cannot have, a truism also visualized by Ben Dean's *Collection*, the enclosed contents of which remain a frustrating mystery in rows of bolted-shut wooden boxes.

The collaborative duo Castaneda/Reiman entrap their own materials in the totemic balancing-act tower of *Dogs Included*, and in *Cup and Saucer* and *Teapot* Schlitt has imprisoned pleasantly curved emblems of



Chris Komater

Pricked, by Chris Komater, 1996, from the photo series, "Nocturne."

civilized domesticity within blocky, unusable molds. Gay Outlaw's *Chalk Cone* is similarly maligned; having been robbed of its functional purpose, it now masquerades as an *objet d'art*. The deadliest form of entrapment beckons from Paul Gasper's sinister *Raid 1*, which presents instructions and tools for exterminating household intruders (rodents and insects, mind you). Bright poison pellets in Plexiglas cases lure with the promise of delight and reward, and like a booby trap in a Bond caper, they snare the curious who are done in by their own insatiable appetites.

Poison might seep in also through Neil Grimmer's *Post Industrial Therapeutics*, an installation of elaborately hooked-up face masks purporting to flood our senses and calm our spirits with sweet-smelling aromatherapy. Maybe it's just my aversion to New Age practices, but to me Grimmer's inhalers look more threatening than comforting, like crazed Dennis Hopper's poppers

source in *Blue Velvet*. Lynchian overtones are also evident in Mari Andrew's *Arbor Real*, an oddly pretty display of magnolia leaves painted royal blue; in Caroline Clerc's *Nipples*, a fungus-like spread of 700 latex and silicon glands; and in Robert Ortbal's surreal *Lifesavers*, all-seeing eyes made with candy, pins, and false lashes.

Other works that explore the meaning of body accouterments are more troubling. While Clerc's wall of fake nipples mocks our cultural obsession with breasts, her *Gossip's Bridle* pieces critique cruel punishments routinely administered to women in the 16th through 18th centuries. The bridles — metal head cages with a plate or spike inserted in the mouth to pin down the tongue — were forced onto women accused of improper speech or sexual impropriety. Suspended from the ceiling and adorned with chains, Clerc's reconstructions of these hideous silencers now resemble wild-side fetish gear. Residue of contemporary body

treatment is displayed opposite these bridles in Megan Wilson's repellent *Face-off*, in which hundreds of used facial masks (presumably the artist's) labeled with consecutive days of the week attest to diligent cleansing.

In a big group show like this every viewer will gravitate towards peculiar favorites. I was particularly taken by John Muse's delicate homage to Kafka's parable "The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel," for which he has constructed a fragile nest of paper blocks inscribed with the tale's words. I also returned several times to Arnold Kemp's fragmented renderings of a man banging his head against a wall, and to the bloody-finger photograph "Pricked," from Chris Komater's *Nocturne* series. Davina Grunstein's *Somewhere Else* cracks the exhibition's secret code wide open. From the intimate, voyeuristic perspective of a tiny window set into the gallery wall, the viewer spies a miniature diorama of trees. This vista suddenly disappears with the flicker of a light bulb, and is replaced by a second scene of a parlor with floral wallpaper and a mirror that reflects your gaze straight back at you. Caught in the act of looking, you wait, frozen, until the light bulb dims and the trees reappear. Grunstein's technical trickery beguiles

with the offhand yet explosive charm that fuels this exhibition's potent contents. Sean Connery might be able to figure it all out, but Roger Moore wouldn't stand a chance. ▼

Stirred Not Shaken is on view at Refusalon, 20 Hawthorne Street, through April 12. Call (415) 546-0158 for information.