

CHRIS KOMATER

509 Cultural Center,
Luggage Store Annex
San Francisco, California
May 1-31

The Luggage Store Annex is located in the Tenderloin of San Francisco, land of soup kitchens and X-rated theaters. Tucked amidst this land of the "urban that was forgot," a door heavily camouflaged by graffiti holds the encouraging sign, "OPEN." 509 Cultural Center is a gallery truly for the initiated, the art crowd that has made its way to this special spot by the invitations clutched in our hands. In this case, Chris Komater had provided a primarily black image with cut-out drawings in white, two men engaged in an amorous tumble studded with stars as if a diagram of the constellations. Sustained examination of the card brings the realization that the image contains a graphic depiction of anal sex, abstracted by a cropping designed to escape immediate detection. We know where we are headed. This is the land of the bear, the furry male of cult homosexual devotion: we are in the world of Komater's "Night of the Hunter: In Pursuit of the Hirsute."

Within the space, Komater creates a domestic setting of sorts, a lamp in the corner, a dresser of drawers, a fur rug in the middle of the floor, photographs aligning the walls. The lamp in the far end of the room is shaded by the drawing on the invitation; the shade slowly twirls to create a sparkle of shadows on the wall. There is an engaging juxtaposition between the graphic quality of the imagery and the romantic, nostalgic knickknack quality of the object. It is easy to imagine these works placed beside a large double bed, with matching sheets completing the ensemble. This is decorator eroticism, a boutique of domestic accessories for the urban gay male. A set of dresser drawers has a similar tenuous relationship to a domestic interior. It is placed away from the wall as object (at home, it would be pushed us against the wall). The dresser constantly emanates a soft sound from the interior. Holes in the drawers invite our fingers to pull them open and discover what is inside. The holes are deliberately rough: a fake fur lining gives a tactile



sequence to the work, a change from rough to soft through the insertion of our finger.

With the opening of each drawer, the sound changes: a swarm of bees, gentle breathing, crickets. This change can cause a jump or a seduction; it is a chance encounter beyond our control. In the middle of the room, a fake carpet has, at its center, the ubiquitous circle that we are beginning to understand as the formal motif of the installation. The hole is edged by a dark brown fringe, creating an analogy that is difficult to miss.

The photographs are displayed in two continuous rows, the disparate images unified by a frame of blackout in the persistent, circular motif. The images themselves are magnified; many are close up views of hair on skin - the bear of the "Night of the Hunter." The magnification of the images implies a microscopic focusing that carries a scientific reference of methodical inspection. Yet there is something rather nostalgic in the miniaturized search within these follicles of hair. This is the view of an obsessive devotion, the post-coital inspection of a lover. The images of hair are alternated with close up views of flowers (one is immediately reminded of Mapplethorpe - but is that like thinking all black women look like Whoopi Goldberg?) A correlation is drawn between the two - chest hair and flower, romantic view of the apple blossom and the enamored view of the endeared beast. The heavy consistency of the circular framing beckons the viewer to make associations, rather than comparisons, between the images.

In another series of photographs, Komater treats the images as abstract landscapes; any reference to scale is abstracted beyond recognition. Treating the male body with a gaze of such objection and aesthetization - a tradition typically affiliated with the female body - causes the viewer to question the validity of treating either gender in this manner.

The proclaimed theme of the installation (on invitation and exhibition notation) is the recently eroticized prototype of the hairy male, the Hirsute, a figure of cultist obsession within the homosexual community. The venue at 509 Cultural Center has established a sympathetic audience for which an element of shock or culturally defined obscenity is simply not an issue, which in turn has permitted a playfulness to Komater's work that is refreshing. The viewer is assumed to be a member of the initiated. This is the greatest strength of the work, for Komater presents a body of work unapologetic of its sexuality, as if culture could not possibly be guilty of prejudice.

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ART PAPERS
September-October 1997