

# frieze

## Tonite!

SPANGANGA GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO, USA

Driving through rural Suffolk County, Jo Addison noticed a series of hand-drawn signs advertising a school disco. Scrawled on the last one was the word 'tonite', written with such anticipatory verve that it threatened to exceed the boundaries of its scrap-wood support. To make it fit, its author had shrunk its second syllable so that the phrase read, awkwardly, 'TONite' and wedged an exclamation mark on the edge of the placard. Inspired, Addison later remade the last sign as her own (Tonite!, 2001).

Curated by Kate Fowle and Renaud Proch, 'Tonite!' takes a uniquely skewed view of the transcendent present-ness implied by its title. The works included in the show focus instead on anticipation, on the endless, jittery evening before the wild night. Each work seems to teeter, purposefully, on the verge of fulfilment or disaster, without ever resolving into a fully-fledged event - Joe Sola's wispy, abstract drawings of explosions from Hollywood blockbusters (Cinema Explosions, 2002) notwithstanding. The resultant atmosphere is one of stoned distraction: nervous, fascinated, paranoid, logophilic, slightly discombobulated and characterized by quirky, associative humour.

Scott Hewicker's paintings, for instance, use the techniques of late Modernist abstraction to depict out-of-kilter landscapes that reconcile Colour Field painting with its estranged cousin Psychedelia. Endless Summer (2003) uses a gorgeously layered oil-stain technique to render a trippy tropical island, remaking Abstract Expressionist presentness into dreamy, timeless fantasy. This is a trip about to go awry, though; bizarre shrouded figures with glowing eyes lurk in the shimmering water around this paradise, transforming the painting's rhetoric of lysergic fulfilment into spiralling stoner dread. Indeed, Hewicker's Agent World (Never Learn Not to Love) (2003) is more apocalyptically dreadful, showing cartoony Mission School motifs imploding into a gobby, planetary black morass in the centre of the canvas.

**Armageddon similarly dominates Joe Sola's works in the exhibition, but in a filmic version. His Cinema Explosions renders the climactic explosions of films such as Jaws (1975) and Men in Black (1997) in deflating watercolour wash, undermining the intensity of the Hollywood special effects by rendering them in an effervescent hobby medium. His explosions are decorative and slight rather than spectacular; it is the strained machismo of Hollywood spectacle that is exploded here, rather than an alien spaceship or murderous shark. Similarly, his video gogogo (2001) edits together a series of Hollywood stars shouting 'go!' to fleeing crowds of extras; without the pay-off explosion their hapless efforts to pump up the suspense appear more explicitly hilarious - and histrionically overacted - than in their cinematic context.**

Most intriguing, though, is the show's inclusion of legendary San Francisco collagist Jess, whose book *O!* (1960) appears in the exhibition, along with his idiosyncratic collages *Boob One* and *Boob Two* (both 1952), produced in collaboration with his partner, Robert Duncan. One collage from *O!* was enlarged to fill a corner of the gallery space. Its intricate, labyrinthine construction defies description. A child crawls through an electrical coil; scruffy, hybrid animals leap over an animate moon; inscrutable, hilarious quotes drawn from *God knows where* are scattered throughout; and so on. Jess' formal intelligence both demands and defies attention. These collages require time that artworks rarely get in a gallery setting, and the viewers of his work must resist the impulse to ferret out discrete answers to the mysteries encoded in them. The works are mazes, not riddles; they attempt to sustain the unbearable/pleasurable moment of reading -and expectation - indefinitely.

Jess' presence - along with several of his peers from the San Francisco scene, including Duncan, Stan Brakhage, and Larry Jordan - is a bit of a puzzle, but one worth solving. It reads as subtly polemical, as an effort to map an alternative to the San Francisco presented by the crafty, cartoony Mission School painters. Artists such as Jess and Brakhage cast a spell of cabalistic weirdness over the somewhat slicker work of the contemporary artists. Addison's limp stuffed animal (*Runt*, 2001), for example, looks distinctly creepy and inanimate beneath Jess' chatty talking dogs. There is an intensity to this historical depth. Strange, productive connections emerge among the generations: a fascination with loopy sci-fi present in several works, and the explicit undertone of altered states of mind.

'Tonite!' proposes anticipation as unexplored territory for art: that dreamlike liminal state before the excitement of the evening itself. This nervous moment is suspended indefinitely in the exhibition, marking its propensity for giddy intoxication, fantasy, slapstick, paranoia and - strangest and funniest of all - a barely submerged horniness that animates several of the exhibitions' most seemingly innocent works. Sometimes, 'Tonite!' claims, anticipation is better than the real thing.

**Julian Myers**