

Art As a Matter of Life and Death

My brother Eric Shultis is a very gifted visual artist. I had the privilege of writing this statement that was included in a show he gave when he lived here in Albuquerque.

We live in a so-called postmodern world where everything is available as material. Free of reference, art and society presently revel in their god-like power. Lichtenstein appropriates Monet's Rouen cathedral paintings, applies the same Ben Day process he used to appropriate comic book images, and is applauded for his egalitarian vision. Cathedrals and comics; high and low culture; all co-exist equally in this utopian wonderland playing out the democratic ideals of "America" on a world-wide scale.

Eric Shultis doesn't criticize present day art and culture so much as he exposes its weaknesses. Life is no purposeless play of signifiers without attachments and neither is art. In his work, attachments between past and present once lost are now regained. There is a sense of great loss and even greater sadness in these works. They mourn. And it is, in fact, their almost funereal nature that connects this work to such fundamental concerns: the intermingling of the living and dead. The reconnection of past and present through memory is one thing; but the making of objects that physically present that reconnection is quite another. Shultis's work is literally, physically and experientially a matter of life and death.



Explicit photographs, ubiquitous in today's society, are, through the use of now obscure photographic methods, returned to the mystery which our sexuality really is. The male body generally, and the male penis specifically, is no longer just a weapon or a tool of political activism. Neither do Shultis's photos seek to objectify, even as they often strike the traditionally objectified poses of the female nude. The result is magical: by reawakening our senses to the beauty of the male body, we become aware of the inherent beauty of all bodies.

The paintings intentionally play with the issue of depth. When looking at the surfaces, one is amazed by their shallowness. How can surfaces so intentionally thin look so deep? And where is

the technique that has historically performed the illusion of depth and dimensionality? No technique, no illusion. The depth is real:

"Let me succumb for a moment to the fascination of the mysterious East and tell you of the examination procedure for the course in internal heat. Candidates assemble naked, in midwinter, at night, on a frozen Himalayan lake. Beside each one is placed a pile of wet, frozen undershirts: the assignment is to wear until they are dry, as many as possible of these undershirts before dawn. Where the power is real, the test is real, and the grading system dumbfoundingly objective. I say no more. I say no more." - **Norman O. Brown**
(Apocalypse)

The power of these paintings is the mysterious nature of their objective reality. No need for symbols, no need for language to intervene. They speak through presence and presence alone. I can say no more.

Norman O. Brown once took me for a walk in the redwood forest just outside the city of Santa Cruz. As we walked, he kept poking his cane into the fallen dead trees. He dug through the decay with that cane, as deep as necessary until some form of greenery appeared. "Look," he said, "there is something alive in there." There always is.



Look closely at the rust paintings and see the living message of Brown's prophetic words: not only is there always something alive in decay; the decay itself is alive. And beautiful.

- Christopher Shultis, July 1997