

Venice Magazine
by Michael Haile
November 1993

john boskovich

“rude awakening”

There has been quite a brouhaha the last few years over Los Angeles' supposed emergence as a world class center for contemporary art. Previously regarded as a bright and sunny land where local artists churned out bright, sunny, decorous art to accent living room couches, LA and her artists were beginning to create dare I say it, SERIOUS art. The defining moment, for some, was MOCA's much discussed 1992 exhibition, “Helter Skelter.” A movement seemed to be afoot, and the reluctant New York and European art establishment began to show interest in the “serious” art—read dark, scary, and occasionally unintelligible conceptual work—that was coming out of Los Angeles. Never mind that the only real movement in LA was the endless stream of overloaded U-Hauls high-tailing it for the imagined serenity and safety of Oregon and Washington state.

Civic boosterism is best left to professionals, but admittedly there is some damn fine art coming out of the City of Angels these days, much of it from Rosamund Felsen's West Hollywood gallery. Case in point, “Rude Awakening,” the current solo exhibition of work by thirty-six year old Los Angeles artist and filmmaker John Boskovich running at Rosamund Felsen Gallery (8525 Santa Monica Boulevard) through November 13th.

Over fifty mixed-media pieces, conceptually bent yet possessing a welcome level of pathos, intimacy, and humor fill the gallery's interior. The majority of the pieces are matted and framed Polaroid photographs with accompanying silk-screened text. Each photograph, taken following the death of a close friend from AIDS, documents some aspect of the interior of Boskovich's home—furniture, objects, visiting friends, images from the television, the artist's own face and body. The texts, which serve as counterpoint to the intimate images, are short slogans drawn from LOVE LINES, a book of “Affirmations for the Mind/Body/Spirit” by Joyce Strum given to Boskovich from the personal effects of his late friend. The remaining pieces in the exhibition include ceramic sculpture, silver jewelry cast from anti-depressant drugs, etched mirrors, a designed acrylic rug, as well as a back-room installation using plastic honey bears, wooden golden Buddhas, tape recordings, silkscreens and a pager. All told, quite a mixed bag of mixed-media.

I met up with Boskovich at his Brentwood home. The subject of a number of exhibitions over the last five years, including several solo shows at Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles and Laurie Rubin Gallery in New York, Boskovich has also received critical acclaim for a series of collaborations with Sandra Bernhard, including the 1989 film *Without You I'm Nothing*, which he co-wrote and directed. The film, executive produced by Nicholas Boeg, drew rave reviews and quickly achieved cult status. Last year, Boskovich and Sandra Bernhard collaborated on “Giving ‘Till it Hurts,” a touching performance piece co-written and directed by Boskovich. Most recently, Boskovich has secured the rights to TRISTESSA, a novel by Jack Kerouac that recounts Kerouac's failed romance with a beautiful

young prostitute living amidst the squalor of the 1950's Mexico City drug underworld. With fellow artist and friend Meg Cranston, Boskovich has completed a screenplay based on the work.

A self-proclaimed “Valley dude,” Boskovich grew up in Los Angeles, receiving his BFA and MFA from Cal Arts. Add to that time spent studying literature at Cambridge, a philosophy degree from USC and a law degree from Loyola and you quickly realize that any discussion of art and contemporary culture with Boskovich will likely cover more terrain than a similar chat with many of his pop culture fetishist peers. For the record, Charles Manson and comic books never came up.

Venice: Tell me about the origins of “Rude Awakening.” What was the rude awakening?

Boskovich: I had ended a long term relationship, so I guess one of the rude awakenings was to be suddenly aware of what was going on out there in the world because of AIDS. After the sudden death of a friend from AIDS I fell into a deep depression and I became very reclusive, spending a lot of time at home. I had been thinking about German photography, particularly post World War II German photography and the ways in which artists were dealing with the legacy of the Holocaust. A lot of the photographic work exhibited this naive belief in documentation—you'd see simple shots of exteriors of buildings—but the work didn't proffer any insight into the overwhelming question of the German experience, namely the nature of German identity following the horrors of Auschwitz. Similarly, AIDS, like the Holocaust, has huge sociological import. My way of addressing the issue is to go inside and become very personal. I wanted to show how I lived and I have always been interested in portraiture and still life. I chose Polaroids because that format is almost intrinsically a non-artist mode and I was drawn to its spontaneity. The quickness and smallness of these snapshots of my experience provided a counterpoint to the bigness of a lot of the German work, which tended to be very large cibachrome photographs. From a psychological perspective, I was trying to be very immediate and real, which is why I limited myself to available light and didn't use any props. I wanted to document what was going on in my experience and get into certain taboo areas in a relatively clear manner. Also I was motivated to present a critique of the recovery movement. My friend who died was a devout Atheist, and he was handed this book [Joyce Strum's *Loveliness*] on his death bed when he could barely move. The book was filled with these positive statements/slogans which were meant to be repeated to provide solace in moments of pain and uncertainty. The first one we came across was “I embrace and accept my body as it is.” Here is a young man on his death bed, and the lack of insight into his state of mind was jeering at me. It seemed like the recovery movement had degenerated to just a bunch of slogans.

In the context of the show, the accompanying affirmations provide a counterpoint to the Polaroid images that is often very humorous but also

underscores their hollowness. I'm reminded of the shot of the little honey bear with the text "I appreciate my uniqueness" or the photo of marijuana with "I have plenty of time today."

The overriding slogan of the recovery movement is "I am powerless and I must submit to a higher power." In the face of the devastation and pain caused by AIDS, what is the implication of that precept for political activism? The recovery movement has become perverse, things like a Course in Miracles. It's become so reductive—wisdom and insight that will fit on your car's bumper. It's bullshit, I mean you can be a drunk or a drug addict, or you can be dying of AIDS, and that's all terrifying and harrowing. But you don't have to be stupid too. You have to look at things a little deeper, you just don't buy a slogan and say everything's ok. That why I use a lot of Buddhist imagery in the show as a counterpoint. Here's a very well thought out, complex system that could offer more solace than mere slogans. It's a religion that has exhibited an amazing amount of temperance and insight over the ages. There are very few programs or Holocausts associated with Buddhism that I know of. I'm not a Buddhist, I'm a catholic, but I admire it as a system very much. Of course, I have to acknowledge that the recovery movement has helped a lot of people and I do see the value of it for some. There are always grey areas, but I just think that it's gone too far, the whole entire aspect of it. It's become a horrible institutionalization of whining.

People are being helped for sure, but there are others who are into it to make a lot of money from that cult of victimization.

Cult of victimization exactly. My God, get over it! How terrifying to tell a rape victim that she is powerless. How can that be reaffirming? It is so ridiculous.

You mention Buddhism. Your work also seems to be influenced quite a bit by literary artists, particularly the beat writers, Jean Genet, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg.

I really wanted to be a poet. I draw most of my inspiration from literary sources. For "Rude Awakening" I was influenced quite a bit by the confessional poets, like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. The photos possess a very intimate, confessional quality. I find confessionalism to be a more powerful rhetorical device. It seems to tap into ... people's intrinsic voyeurism. Hopefully, it then is able to ... some pathos and feeling.

Your work is kind of Cal Arts-influenced, Conceptualist look. Feeling and emotion are not usually mentioned much in the context of that kind of art. In what way is your work a critique of conceptualist conceits?

First of all, I don't really consider myself a "Cal Arts artist" I mean, I admire John Baldessari's work but I'm much more influenced by someone like Patti Smith. I'm also influenced by my peers, artists like Meg Cranston and Chris Wilder. I really enjoy their work; Meg and Chris were very instrumental in helping to put the current show together. As far as Conceptualism's conceits, there's this notion that emotional content is taboo. Fuck that, that's absurd. It's such an arcane idea. My work is antithetical to that designer conceptualism as practiced by Joseph Kosuth, and others. I hate the dryness and lack of humor of that kind of work. Obviously, my work is well thought out and there is a conceptual complexity, but it also has a strong emotional content. Conceptualism is so repressive and elitist and uptight about homosexuality. It's all so uninteresting to me, a big ruse like the Emperor's New Clothes. Actually, what I like most about Conceptualism is that it's this brilliant fuckover on pretentious collectors. It's unintelligible, and worse, it's boring—there's really nothing there.

Your work covers a lot of media—photography, sculpture, installation art. Also you've done a number of performance projects for film and theatre. Your career might seem confusing to someone trying to pigeon-hole you.

Well, yeah. The media can be oppressive in its attempt to label creative artists. I just like making different things, films, off-Broadway shows, photographs, paintings, sculptures, jewelry and I get bored rather quickly working in the same media. My favorite artists are the intergenre artists, artists with a wide variety of interests like Pasolini, Cocteau, Duchamp, and Pound and Eliot to a certain extent. Criticism has a hard time with those kind of intergenre artists and so they are often ignored. I'm inspired by people who push and explore boundaries. Yes, I've done work outside of the art world, but I think all of my work expresses my curiosity about certain issues.

Certainly there is a theatricality romanticism and playfulness to all of your work.

True. I am very much a romantic and humor is also very important. It has to be funny.

There's quite a bit of references to drugs in Rude Awakening, both recreational and therapeutic.

A lot of my work focuses on pleasures of the earth—sex, drugs, rock and roll, art, etc. One of the simplest critiques of the recovery movement is based in that traditional decadent notion of unfettered self-expression and self-realization. What I always liked about the literary artists of estheticism and decadence was that they didn't want to recover. Life was being lived to the fullest. It was exciting and vital. I don't mean decadence in the sense of being a bad person. More a dedication to a free and expressive life. I am very careful to create moral work. I like the edginess of my work and I think I often get very close to offending someone, but I don't like to push it to the point of making people angry. I'd rather seduce the viewer with humor and strong emotional content. As far as the marijuana references throughout the exhibition, well that's probably the only unironic thing about the show. Hey I'm a Valley dude at heart

and I full-tilt boogie advocate the use of pot. Full-tilt boogie.

Talk a little about your collaborations with Sandra Bernhard.

We started working together informally and it just evolved. She was doing stand-up at the Comedy Store and her material was going over people's heads, of course, I loved it. I suggested to her that her approach and subject matter was more related to performance art, like work from Laura Anderson and Ann Magnuson previously, she was doing this straight Borscht Belt comedy and then singing the Eagles' "Desperado." ... I remember suggesting she do "Me and Mrs. Jones," and ... proposed...that... wouldn't be about singing as much as... singing that particular...song... Sandra, in Without You I'm Nothing and Giving 'Till It Hurts, was a way to explore issues of pop culture and notions of persona and self-concept. I learned a lot from that collaboration but I began to become less interested in what she wanted to do with her career. You know, my life and work is a series of inquiries. Art should be interrogatory, not didactic. It should appeal to one's sense of curiosity and inquisitiveness. I mean, I always formulate some sort of ad hoc criticism after I make an object and I think about a lot of things while I'm working, but there isn't usually an organized scheme. That kind of work bores me. I don't know... who knows? I'm just the artist.

A lot of
my work
focuses on
pleasures of
the earth -
sex, drugs,
rock and
roll, art etc.