

What the Butler Saw

Attendant to Matters Esthetica that Abound in the House of Culture

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by James Scarborough

"Three: Site Specific Installation by John Hillis Sanders" Utopia Restaurant, Long Beach, CA

To see this show is to eject from the complacency of your Ground Control Barcalounger to shuttle like David Bowie's Major Tom, wide-eyed, agog, humbled, perhaps, amidst the stars of your imagination.

At the restaurant hang still life photographs and a video monitor that shows the artist at work. At the Unit 3 cubbyhole of a Gallery one door down, you see the black light installation of the objects photographed and their process videotaped.

First I saw the photographs. Startling, these stars. Each depicts a constellation of three stars. Each star looks like its star-flesh has been flayed in some Star War; what remains are nerve endings of colorful circuitry that beam like five-point neon-bright billboards in a penumbral octopus blue ink space.

The show includes three sets of star photographs, one set to each room. Read from left to right, each set evolves from simple to complex, from static, television blue to frenetic, Crayola-resplendent. Each star gets bombarded by what looks like irradiated pellets of light as it combs through space.

What I liked most was the posture of these stars. Staunch, bolt-upright, *star-proud*. They broach the third dimension – and probably the fourth – and look like the soldier in the Robert Capa photograph who has just been shot as he leans forward so both arms trail behind his torso. Or else like one of the peasants in Goya's execution paintings.

And I marveled how Sanders distilled time, my second favorite thing in the show. Time accretes with each photograph. The star surface becomes more littered with spaghetti skeins of acrylic. As the surface becomes more littered, the ambient black light highlights the spaghetti skeins on and on and on.

It's hard not to wax enthused at the associations of stars with a whole other dimension of time and space. What, you've never camped out at Anza Borrego? Follow these clusters along the wall and you glimpse what Saint Augustine called the eternal present of absolute time, a concept which fundamentalists would enlist into *Christianism*, Andrew Sullivan's apt and more-funny-than-appears-at-first glance term for the political appropriation of Christianity.

That's just the still lives. A video above the restaurant bar shows Sanders at work. Bathed in black light, he pollocks in front of three virgin stars – nice image, think of "Silent Night" – splattering his paint the way a Frenchman would use a handkerchief to challenge another Frenchman to a duel.

Finally, Gallery E was oh-so-tiny and stifling. My first impression: opening a treasure chest at the bottom of the sea and finding all manner of jewels and doubloons that would sate the staunchest materialist.

Phillip Glass piano music, black light atmospherics. And three large paint splattered sculptures of stars. The gallery cubicle had been stretched with black canvas so the remnants of every gesture, every drip, every particle of paint, on the floor, the walls, on the black lights themselves shone like the exterior of a bank of 2 AM casinos.

What occurred to me is this: given the choice between the aura of something (three stars) and the documentation of that aura (photography or video), I'll take aura hands down.

Sanders' show makes you realize that beauty is nothing without aura. Draw a Venn Diagram. Chart the relationship. Aura trumps beauty. Every single time.

The show runs until August 29, 2006. The restaurant is located at 445 East First Street, Long Beach, CA. United E Gallery is located around the corner at 117 Linden Avenue, #E. For more information call (562) 432-6888 or visit www.utopiarestaurant.net.