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gallery

Exhibit worth a second glance

Willie Osterman
Aperture Gallery
Erb Memorial Union

University professor Willie Osterman's photos are initially a puzzling group of images that seem to lack coherence and consistency. Though as a collection they are not surprising, they do merit more than casual examination.

The subjects of these photographs are familiar, perhaps too much so. As individual pieces, however, they seem to have more value, for within this show are the beginnings of many interesting paths. One picture, for instance, shows a flock of black plywood sheep which mysteriously appeared on campus last spring. But Osterman doesn't pursue the surreal aspects of everyday life in the rest of the show. It is an assortment. There are merry-go-rounds, decorated automobiles, "humorous" signs and window displays. All of these images appear to be disconnected, as if Osterman were challenging the viewer to find meaning in a purposely careless assemblage. And as with most art, it is entirely a matter of intent.

This display appears to be an attempt to break away from the abstract perspective of Osterman's earlier work. As with most transitions, there is a temporality about these pieces that suggests a lack of content or substance.

Admittedly they are meant to be light in nature, more whimsical than serious. However, the ironies

are a little thin. The subject matter, as in the picture of dressmaker's dummies unclothed and accompanied by the word "elegance," is almost cliché. But it is not the presence of cliché that makes one question Osterman's intent. It is the impression that this collection is forced in its composition, and that some of the banality we see was wholly unintentional.

It is fitting that these photos are displayed on walls between the cafeteria lines and the central lobby of the EMU, for this collection is very suitable for viewing on the run. Indeed, these photos were captured somewhat on the run. Using a pocket-sized camera, Osterman attempted to get

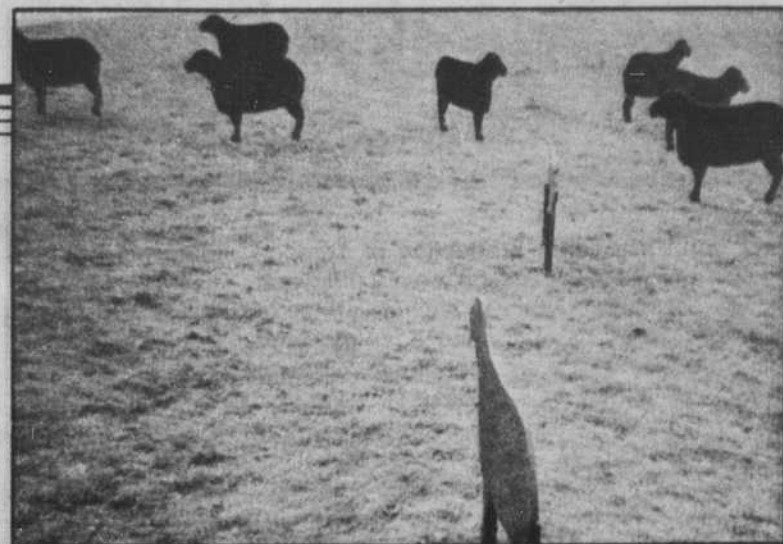


photo by willie osterman

elaborately air-brushed van, human feet next to the legs of a tripod and the ghostly image of a figure dwarfed by leafless trees are photographs which, in one sense, are disconnected. But as instinctual compositions reflecting the crazy order, or distinct lack of order in the universe, they are rather charmingly related.

Looking at them from that point of view suggests an intimacy, a personal connection with the artist that is not present in the work of more technically oriented photographers. In these images we are aware of the creator's exis-

reveals that there is a great deal that does not immediately "meet the eye." The content is there, but one has to explore each image thoughtfully to discover it. In a way, this is the central flaw in Osterman's show. His photos are at once light and serious. This ambiguity has undoubtedly confused some viewers, and caused others to pass this exhibit by. That, however, is a risk that all visual artists take. This is no reflection on Willie Osterman's technical or artistic ability, and this same duality implies excellence by some standards, in that the show operates on two levels: it can be seen quickly and appreciated as a lyrical look at the world, and it can just as well be viewed more carefully, if one has the time to slowly investigate the subtle commentary that Osterman makes about life in America.

From a glance to a "heavy look," these photos are perplexing, and to the questioning mind they are an inspiration toward further inquiry into human perception. That, apart from aesthetics and craftsmanship, is perhaps the most reliable thread to follow in evaluating art. Even though there is less clarity of purpose in this show than might be desired, Osterman seems to have lived up to the promise of the store window, giving us a "touch of feeling" that prompts the magic of the second glance.

by tony budd

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down on light-sensitive paper a feeling for the transitory nature of seeing and remembering. He explains in his preface to the show that "photography is a way of recording forever the things one eye may see only for a moment." A glimpse of an ornate art deco box office, floral curtains inside an

tence. We can sense his laughter, or at least his appreciation of the oddity of the plywood sheep and the naivete of the photo studio window filled with its portrait wares proudly claiming to perform "photography with a touch of feeling."

Closer analysis of the show

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