

Costello, Devon and Esme Watanabe. "Ameri©an Dre@m." *NY Arts* 8, no. 4 (April 2003): 17.

What is the American dream represented in this show and whose dream is it? The politics are clear from the ironic interplay of language and symbols in the title. The "Ameri©an" is a commercial trademark, the "Dre@m" is the faceless mobility of the high-speed internet. The show stages a satirical representation of the American dream as a veritable nightmare in which the individual is consumed by an economy of homogenization. The exhibition includes the work of over fifty artists, most mimicking or revolting against the aesthetics of advertising. On the surface, many pieces look slick and appealing but on closer examination, the dysfunction of American culture becomes evident. Often, the title of the work or other subtle elements direct the viewer to a powerful critique of American consumer culture. Take, for example, Tom Otterness' bronze sculptures.

# Ameri©an Dre@m

A Survey at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Devon Costello and Esme Watanabe



Otterness's figurines are placed on the floor, cartoonish little men gleefully clutching bags of money, looking like Disney character outcasts. They illustrate a relationship between money and happiness. In Otterness's work there is a conflict between the initial appearance of the object and the message that the viewer perceives. Ultimately, the sculptures become a soft critique of greed and folly.

Other works in *American Dream* deal with the relationship between those who are consumed by dominant culture and those who are doing the consuming. The four digital images by Jason Salavon titled *Every Playboy model from (1960, 1970, 1980, 1990)* can be viewed as an example of this. Each piece is a composite image of *Playboy* models from specific decades. The images look similar and appear to be abstract, fluttery diffusions only vaguely referencing their fleshy figurative origins. Salavon comments on how the blatant repetition of pornographic images dissolves the identity of the individual and creates a realm of experience that is homogenized and without reference. Also addressing this theme is Paul Pfiffer's video.

Pfiffer's video shows a multiplicity of basketball players, continually moving and morphing into one another. Recalling Michael Jackson's music video, *Black or White*, Pfiffer uses digital technology to make one athlete become every athlete. The repeated shot is a close up of the faces of sports stars as they violently run and change direction; at every jerk of the body, a new face appears. This piece is initially exciting and has high energy, but as the viewer watches, one begins to realize the banal, consistency of form and behavior. There is the feeling that if you've seen one of these athletes, even in their most intense moment, you've seen them all. The video becomes an endless repetition of shape-shifting identities without meaning. Both Salavon's and Pfiffer's work suggest that the American dream is not a heroic triumph of the individual over the overwhelming odds of established culture, but a complacent state of uniformity and attractively packaged commodity.

There is also a suggestion in "Ameri©an Dre@m" that the origin of the idealistic fantasy of an equalitarian, democratic American dream

comes from an affluent class of consumers. The piece that speaks most clearly to this is by Dread Scott. He exhibits a silk-screen with a large, black woman with a white, toothy grin exclaiming, "If white people didn't invent air what would we breathe?" This piece makes a clear statement about the manipulation of the American dream to support the elitism inherent in its construction. Another piece in this vein that speaks to marginalized viewpoints is the *Dyke Action Machine!* DAM exhibits a set of realistic looking billboards portraying a publicized, tongue-in-cheek, sex-ed for lesbians. A lesbian couple is seen enacting typically heterosexual displays of sexuality in order to comment on the nature of advertising and media.

Finally, there is a piece by Paul Shambroom, a photograph printed on canvas so as to look like a highly realistic painting. It is an image of a state government's board room. The board members in the image are stereotypical, white, male, average, American dreamers. Part of the American dream is playing a role in the government, making each individual voice heard, making a vote count. [more](#)



Top - Bottom: Paul Shambroom, *Lewiston, Minnesota (population 1,405), City Council, March 10, 1999.* (L to R) Roger Layfenburger (Mayor), Denny Engrav, Gary Sauers, Rob Rys (City Administrator). 1999. archival pigmented inkjet on canvas with varnish, 37 x 23 inches (F) / Jason Salavon, *Herotown 1, #1*, 1998. digital C-print, 16 1/2 x 45 inches / Tom Otterness, *Last Penny*, 1999. bronze, 28 x 27 1/4 x 18 inches. All images: Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York