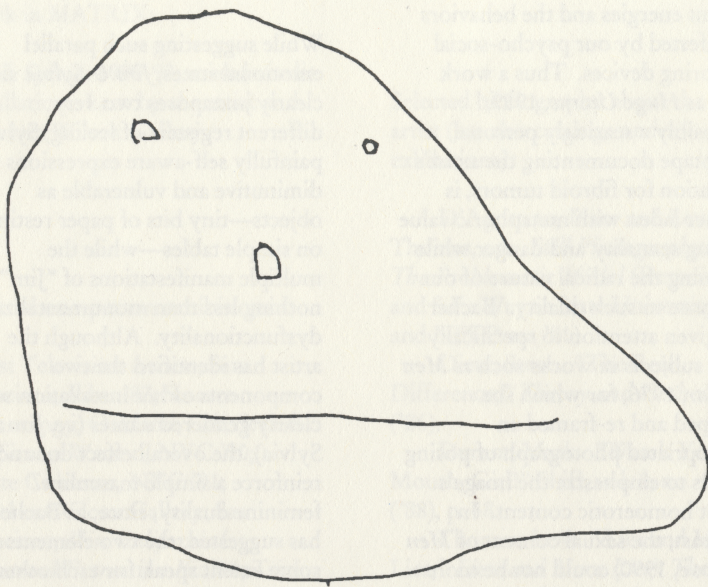


Jim & Sylvia, 1990-93 (installation detail)



Since the 1970s, Lutz Bacher's art has explored human identity as it is defined through gender, sexuality, and the human body. Her work exposes areas of ambiguity in the social codes that model our perception of ourselves and others. In particular, Bacher is concerned with how our identity is fashioned within the context of contemporary American culture.

In much of Bacher's work, identity is defined as a tense equilibrium between libidinal, sometimes violent energies and the behaviors manifested by our psycho-social censoring devices. Thus a work such as *Huge Uterus*, 1989, ostensibly a searingly personal videotape documenting the artist's operation for fibroid tumors, is further laden with metaphoric value linking sexuality and danger while exposing the radical nature of our response to such duality. Bacher has given attention to specifically male subjects in works such as *Men at War*, 1976, for which she cropped and re-framed an appropriated photograph of posing sailors to emphasize the image's latent homoerotic content. In contrast, the sexual content of *Men in Love*, 1990, could not be more explicit: male hetero- and homosexual fantasies are printed onto thirty-one twelve-inch mirrors. The compulsion to fantasize—the drive to displace and disperse desire—becomes the subject of the work.

In her MATRIX installation *Jim & Sylvia*, Bacher situates a group of found texts—pages from the diary and will of a woman named Sylvia—within an environment consisting of enormous, "childlike" wall-drawings of faces, which the artist identifies as "Jim." "These Sylvia papers," states Bacher, "are

presented on adult-size children's tables with chairs. Viewers are invited to sit in the chairs and read...to in effect take on Sylvia's partial memories of herself as a needy but courageous child, an isolated but spunky young woman, a disillusioned wife and disappointed mother, a cranky and somewhat bitter old lady. All of this takes place surrounded by the narrative of giant faces: from giddy to agitated to morose...a veritable cosmology of the human face as the mute bearer of all meaning."¹

While suggesting such parallel emotional states, *Jim & Sylvia* also clearly juxtaposes two very different registers of feeling; Sylvia's painfully self-aware expressions are diminutive and vulnerable as objects—tiny bits of paper resting on simple tables—while the multiple manifestations of "Jim" do nothing less than monumentalize dysfunctionality. Although the artist has identified the two components of her installation with clearly gendered names (i.e. Jim and Sylvia), the overall effect does not reinforce a simple masculine/feminine duality, since, as Bacher has suggested, the two elements to some extent speak for each other. "Sylvia's papers," Bacher observes, "provide these macro faces with their micro narrative."² Furthermore, as represented by these crudely drawn faces, "Jim" perhaps has more in common with marginalized identities such as that of the child or the psychotic than he does with the socially dominant adult male. By simultaneously underscoring the similarities and differences between "Jim" and "Sylvia," Bacher casts the viewer into a mesmerizing vertigo that is at once humorous and deeply disturbing.

Lutz Bacher lives and works in Berkeley.

Lawrence Rinder

1. Lutz Bacher, unpublished project description, 1990.
2. Ibid.

Work in MATRIX:

Jim & Sylvia, 1990-93, mixed-media installation. Lent by the artist and Mincher/Wilcox Gallery.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Artist Television Access, San Francisco, *Jokes* '87; Sincere Technology, Oakland, CA, *Speech* '88; Simon Watson, NYC '90; White Columns, NYC '91; Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco, *Miss California/ Menstrual Extraction Kit* '91; Trial Balloon, NYC, *Sex with Strangers* '92; Kim Light Gallery, L.A., *Men in Love* '92.

Selected group exhibitions:

La Mamelle and San Francisco Camerawork, *Photography and Language* '76 (catalog); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Problematic Photography* '78; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Photographs and Words* '81;

Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX, *Recoding Sexuality* '86 (catalog); Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY, *Bay Area Conceptualism/Two Generations* '89 (catalog); Simon Watson, NYC, *The Clinic* '90; Burden Gallery/Aperture, NYC, *The Body in Question* '91 (catalog); Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR, *Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic* '92 (travels to Otis School of Art and Design, L.A. '93) (catalog).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

D'Agostino, Peter and Lew Thomas, eds. *Still Photography/The Problematic Model* (Detroit and S.F.: Wayne State University and NFS Press '81).

Dietz, Steve. "The Real Difference," *Theory and Flesh* no. 2 ('86).

Durant, Mark. "Watch Your Mouth, Girl!" *Shift*, vol. 2, no. 4 ('88), p. 48.

Thomas, Lew. "Lies and More Lies," *Lies (and More Lies): The Photography of Representation* (New Orleans: Contemporary Arts Center '89).

Porges, Maria. "Lutz Bacher," *Artforum* (Mar. '91), pp. 136-37.

Kotz, Liz. "Lutz Bacher, 'Men in Love,'" *Shift*, vol. 5, no. 1 ('91).

Mahoney, Robert. "Lutz Bacher, White Columns," *Arts* (Jan. '92), p. 83.

Kotz, Liz. "Sex with Strangers," *Artforum* (Sept. '92), pp. 83-85.

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