UNDER SIEGE

A VAULT INSTALLATION
by

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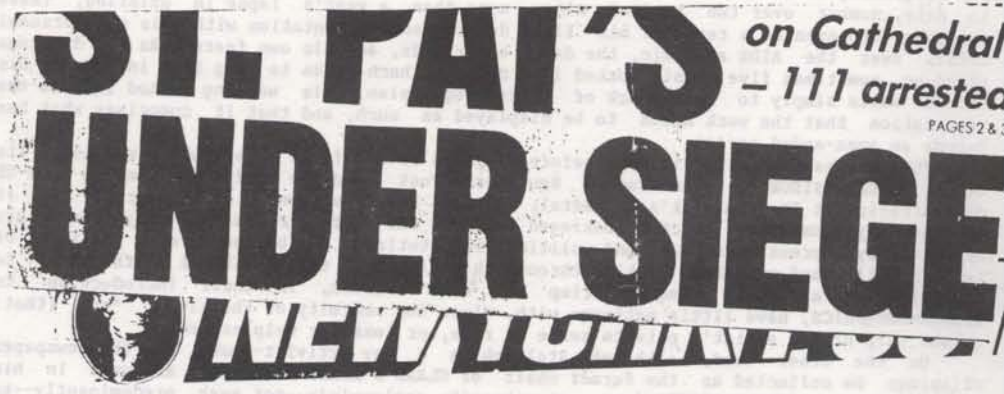
MICHAEL HUNT STOLBACH:



GEORGE YUDICE

UNDER SIEGE

> There is no question but that we must fight the unspeakable violence we incur from the society in which we find ourselves. But if we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be able to recognize--along with our rage--our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness. Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy. (Douglas Crimp)

Beginning in 1988, Michael Hunt Stolbach started working on a series of drawings that, to date, number over two hundred. After more than a year's lapse in painting, these drawings represented a renewal: his first determined confrontation with his own personal crisis over the AIDS epidemic, the death of friends, and his own fears. As the drawings piled up, sometimes five or six worked in a day, Stolbach began to hang them in rows on his studio walls simply to keep track of their progression. This working method led to the realization that the work needs to be displayed as such, and that it comprises what has become an open-ended series.

This series, exhibited in part before, appears in its first major public showing. Its title "UNDER SIEGE," taken from a New York Post headline referring to an ACT-UP demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral, restores the true meaning of the phrase, as it is the gay community which is besieged and not the Catholic Church. Gay people are besieged by repressive social and political institutions and by their own feelings of terror, guilt, and sadness. Working through this difficult terrain is not a throwback to the kind of art that Dougals Crimp and Adam Rolston, in their introduction to AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS, have little patience with, given the enormity of the siege: "art [that] speaks only of the artist's private sense of rage, or loss, or helplessness."

On the other hand, although Stolbach is a gay activist--many of the newspaper clippings he collected as the former chair of GLAAD's media committee are used in his current work--, "UNDER SIEGE" does not subscribe exclusviely--not even predominantly--to the prevailing "politics of representation." This is not to say that his work is not political; it is, through and through, but in a way that bridges the public concerns of AIDS activism with other concerns that have been traditionally cast as "private" or, in John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman's phrase, "intimate matters": sexuality, love, domesticity, identity, spirituality, bodily concerns, and so on.

The confluence of Stolbach's two vocations--painter with a particular concern with mortality and activist fighting discrimination and stereotyping of gay identity--has led him to search for a visual language that translates the operations of gay desire and and fantasy without renouncing the pressures of public culture. His "private" concerns with mortality are evident in the "Titanic Series" (1979-80), in which the broad, strident brushstrokes of red, dark blue and green move the viewing eye into an abyss of water, often with memento mori-- skulls and shrouded figures--floating on the surface or lurking in the corner of the painting. This unconscious concern with death and mourning soon surfaced as a more conscious lament over the death of several close friends since the mid 80s. The Titanic imagery has given way to landscapes made up of bones; the imagery changed but the brushwork and color, the gesture that conveyed a sense of mourning, continued in the rectilinear shapes of the bones, often echoing the mass graveyards of the Holocaust. It is at this point in the evolution of his work that Stolbach begins to use newspaper clippings about AIDS discrimination and antigay violence, often legally sanctioned as in Bowers v. Hardwick in which a sharply divided Supreme Court upheld Georgia's sodomy statute.

As a painter with a graduate art history degree from Harvard, Stolbach's work holds an ongoing dialogue with artistic tradition, usually with a critical twist. He is especially receptive to the representation of gay sensibility in the themes, images and relations depicted in art throughout the ages. This concern surfaces in his work as he restores the gay sensibility bowdlerized by museological practices. His male nudes, which sometimes echo Michelangelo's torsos and Caravaggio's arrangements of male figures, emphasize luscious buttocks and brandished cocks, both direct attention to homoeroticism and rekindle fantasy and sexual affirmation in an age shrouded in anxiety and mourning. In some works, of course, the double edged feelings of desire and fear meld in imagery that reworks the death/orgasm metaphor, as in "I Dreamt I Slept in Marble Halls." The figure in this painting, although lifted from a porn magazine, makes ready reference to Michelangelo's "Dying Slave."

In "UNDER SIEGE" all of the above concerns come together quite powerfully. In "Crime in the Bedroom," for example, Stolbach reworks Caravaggio's "Musicians" (Metropolitan Museum) to reestablish its homoerotic subject. Art historians have been reluctant to see this work as depicting a homoerotic relationship among the men. When the Met first acquired and cleaned this painting in the 50s, it was discovered that one of the young music makers is really winged Cupid. At that time the Met chose to leave the Cupid's wings "clipped," arguing that Caravaggio himself had painted out the wings. By the time the Met cleaned the painting again in the late 70s it seemed permissible to allow the winged Cupid to emrege, only to inform the Met visitor that Cupid was a music lover. The fact is, however, that the two figures which Stolbach includes repeatedly in his paperworks have their legs entwined and have been depicted by Caravaggio in the traditional position of lovemaking.

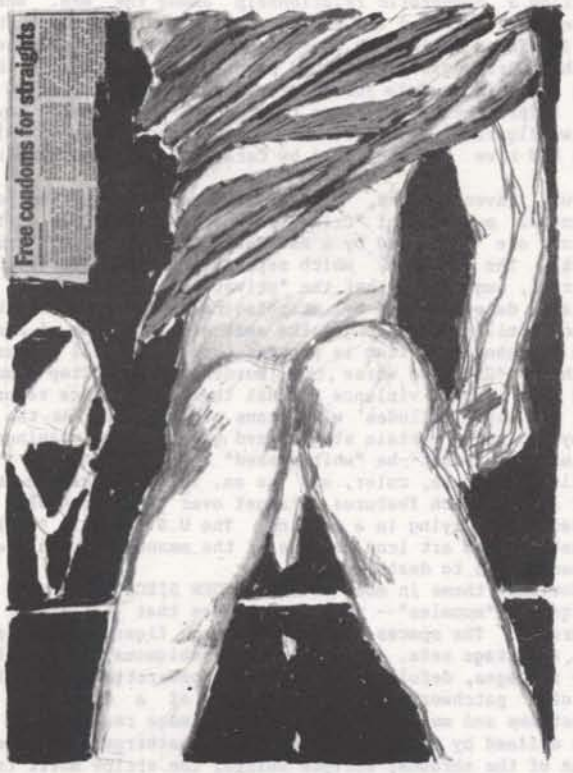
Stolbach's visual inventiveness, historical consciousness and political engagement combine in the central metaphor of "Crime in the Bedroom." In it the musicians from Caravaggio's painting are separated by a New York Times clipping, "Crime in the Bedroom" (Bowers v. Hardwick). The clipping, which separates the two lovers, is overpainted to look like a prison cell, suggesting that the "private" relationship of two gay adults has been criminalized and delegitimized by museological practice and the U.S. system of (in)justice. Stolbach similarly challenges the aesthetic autonomy of Jasper Johns's flag and target icons. In one sheet the flag is papered over in several places by clippings that demonize gays, such as "Gays are worse than murderers" and "Stop homosexuals or they'll infect us all," and that reoprt violence against them: "Violence report released." The point is that the art world colludes with icons of power such as the flag that bind a "people" together by excluding certain stigmatized groups. The meanings conveyed by these icons should not--indeed, cannot--be "whitewashed" by insisting on "purely aesthetic" matters such as design, texture, color, and so on. The same can be said for "Target," again a reworking of Johns, which features a target over the crotch of a male nude standing in front of a shrouded figure lying in a coffin. The U.S. flag in the background suggests that the target is not just an art icon but one of the means by which the U.S. government has targetted and doomed gays to death.

Death is a dominant theme in most of the "UNDER SIEGE" series. Many of the sheets combine shrouded figures--"mummies"-- with male nudes that are either doning/taking off striped shirts or shrouds. The spaces occupied by these figures are tiled bathhouse rooms, ward-like chambers, and stage sets. They are very ambiguous, dreamlike spaces in which images of violence-- ribcages, defoliated trees--and homoeroticism, combine with each other like the tatters of a patchwork or the snatches of a dream. One particular motif facilitates the metasteses and metamorphoses from one image realm to the other: stripes. Whether the space is defined by tiled walls, prison or bathrrom bars, tree limbs, the shape of bones, the design of the shrouds, striped shirts, the stripe motif translates one space into another. Color and gesture also establish echoes from one panel to the other: highly textured striations of black, red, and blue create a visual energy that moves randomly--like the unconscious--throughout the ensemble of panels.

Stolbach uses this transformative pictorial language to create spatial metaphors that very effectively translate the political into visual terms. The constant inversion and reversion between public, institutional space and private, domestic space goes beyond an aesthetic that merely indicts institutional practices for their role in the repression of private gay life. Throughout the series, for example, the museum is transformed into a

home for the shrouded bodies, a "mummy house," in Stolbach's own words. In "Turning the Mummy," a man without features stands to the side of bunk bed-like shelves which hold shrouded figures. It is an ambiguous space, that of a museum display or of household storage. The mummies are kept on shelves like so many personal objects, each the holder of memories. And just as we might pick up a photograph or a vase that reminds us of family and friends, the man turns over the memories embodied in the shrouded figure. This is not something that could be done in a museum, where displays are not to be touched.

In these panels we keep in touch with the dead. They are not just "objets d'art" but living memories. Unlike the museum, in this transformed space there is no institutionally sanctioned autonomy. These "mummy houses" suggest a space that is simultaneously domestic and sacred, like the catacombs. Domesticity, the sacred, and dreams come together here, for this is also where a new language of privacy is being worked through. The transformation from institution to home in this "pictorial unconscious" means, however, that the "new"



privacy not wrought at the expense of public and political concerns. The series conveys the feeling, rather, that the most politically pressing issue at the moment is the reinvention of ways of establishing commuity, reeroticizing sexuality, remembering our dead, and practicing some form of spirituality. In this way, Stolbach takes a step beyond Crimp's call to engage our art in mourning and militancy. We also need a new imaginary for conveying an intimacy that is not eroded by the public and political stances which we must take to fend off external and internal repression.