

Face to Face

James Esber sees
Lincoln through
a glass darkly

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The sacred and the profane, the delightful and the disgusting — we're used to their melodramatic clash in art since time immemorial, but these days artists seem more drawn to their weird symbiosis, the way in which they are threaded together in the most ordinary, quotidian, "normal" ways.

Take, for example, the new show "German Indians" at the Bernard Toale Gallery. Photographers Andrea Robbins and Max Becher have together documented a curious trend in Deutschland — a subculture of German *volk* who dress up in Native American drag on the weekend; these addled Aryans not only recreate their pseudo-Sioux garb in gloriously "authentic" detail, they even camp out in teepees.

Of course the photographs tell a dryly ironic tale of self-delusion — the pale, nervous eyes of tubby middle managers stare out from these glorious headdresses, and a blonde, blue-eyed Pocahontas

looks like she's off to Valhalla on the autobahn. But something darker runs beneath these bright, blank images, which Robbins and Becher have self-consciously styled as calm, rational records. There's something deeply puzzling in a nation which saw fit to exterminate a large portion of its own population identifying so romantically with the victims of American "manifest destiny." And yet who are we to judge? Don't Americans, likewise, dote on the fate of Germany's Jews, while bristling at the suggestion that we are guilty of "holocausts" ourselves (slavery being the other one)? And when one learns the Nazis themselves had sympathy for the "Indians," the natural hypocrisy of the human heart can suddenly seem overwhelming.

But if the implications of Robbins and Becher's work are stunning (even the nerds who dress up as Luke Skywalker now seem somehow sinister to me), the photographs themselves are not. These two artists have made a career of recording self-conscious cultural mimicry, yet their nonjudgmental stance imposes a sharp limit on their impact. Trapped in the social-study requirements of their method, they're forced to eschew any trace of feeling — and so are almost prevented from delivering an image

with any punch; their ideas haunt you, but their photographs, lovely as they are, do not.

But somehow James Esber transcends this problem with "The Lincoln Project" which currently shares the gallery with Robbins and Becher. Esber takes an American image almost synonymous with nobility and self-sacrifice — the gaunt visage of the Christ-like Lincoln — and then willfully distorts it through the lens of his obsession with the grotesque; the results may be repellent, but they're also somehow resonant.

For Esber's fascination with the graphic representation of flesh — in all its earthy grossness — has its own weird power. He has a particular fetish for the severe (and palpably needle-sharp) scores and cross-hatchings of the classic engraving — only he bears down on his own strokes so heavily that every wrinkle in his portraits becomes a crevice, every lock of hair a creepily rigid whorl. Thus his "Lincoln portraits" are a series of transmogrified grotesques, each of them shape-shifting into a psychedelic corpulence pitched somewhere between M.C. Escher and R. Crumb.

But Esber's paintings in plasticine (i.e., Play-Dough) take his gooey, perverse tactility to a whole new level. Here, in hallucinatory,



Andrea Robbins and Max Becher's German Indian: Young Man with Sheild, 1998

high-contrast reds, yellows, and greens, Esber creates creepily distant images that twist Lincoln's visage into a variety of cruel affects, and then push his very recognizability to bizarre limits. Curiously, though, we can always make out the familiar features in each seething mass of texture and pigment. This hall of "presidents" is like a bizarre meditation on the dark side of identity — and on the weird, organic shift-

ness of historical perspective.

If you think, however, that these maleficent masks could never have anything to do with honest Abe, consider this — the man we revere for abolishing slavery also created the first "Indian reservations," a "final solution" which did not go unappreciated by the Nazis some seventy years later. It's an ironic little link that quietly ties together the two halves of this very disquieting show.