

Astman doesn't have it yet

By Sol Littman Toronto Star

The trouble with photography is that on the one hand it is so easy and on the other so difficult.

Point the camera at something, push the button and out pops a picture. Given autofocus, automatic exposure and self-developing color film, it is almost impossible to fail to get something recognizable and interesting.

Masterpieces, however, truly memorable images revealing new truths and setting new aesthetic standards, are few and far between.

Some photographers accept this limitation and work with it. They make a cult of avoiding virtuosity by avoiding all photographic tricks of close cropping, dramatic lighting, arrested action or multiple images. Instead they emphasize the banality of their images, their naive snapshot quality.

By making it more banal they hope to reach a new level of artistry in much the same way pop painters found a new aesthetic in billboard-size copies of soup cans and comic books.

Others are discontent. They literally chew their negatives, splatter their prints, superimpose, recombine and shatter their images to reveal more than their camera lens could capture.

Barbara Astman, whose work is on exhibition at the Sable-Castelli Gallery, 33 Hazelton Ave., until March 24, falls curiously somewhere in between these two approaches.

Using an SX 70 Polaroid camera — the expensive model — she has taken numerous pictures of herself and her friends. Mostly the subjects stare straight ahead into the camera's lens with barely a change of expression from shot to shot.

Out of each such sitting, Astman has selected six images and arranged them in a series. Beneath each picture she has typed in a line of imaginary dialogue.

For example, the show's announcement card shows Astman in six poses with almost the same sulky expression on her oval Modiglianish face. The dialogue, spelled out frame by frame, reads: "She told him she was uncomfortable with herself . . . and she was uncomfortable around her friends too . . . he asked if she was uncomfortable around him . . . she felt she was uncomfortable around him . . . he knew, but he let her answer slip away . . . she pretended not to notice."

The source of Astman's pique is evidently the complexity of normal he/she relationships. The same is true for her friends.

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Astman and photos: Not the right combination, but maybe soon

The banality of the flat Polaroid snapshots is equalled only by the banality of the subject's Dick and Jane post-adolescent maunderings.

The question is: Do such double commonplaces add up to something new and exciting or do they simply reinforce each other's vacuity?

"At first I took only pictures of myself in different outfits," she says. "Then came the search for key words that would best sum up a feeling I received from the image. These were translated into a tight phrase. Finally, I arranged them in a sequence.

"It was great fun. It allowed me to become an actress for a while and then play the playwright."

The images are exactly as she wanted them to be.

"I wanted them undramatic," she says, "so the words could play their part. This way the writing influences the way you see the image. I am directing you, manip-

ulating you, making you see what I want you to see.

"Call it an act of aggression if you wish."

The young artist (28) does not feel she can trust the image to speak for itself. "That's a traditional photographic notion," she insists.

A couple of years ago Astman gained considerable local fame with a series of portraits converted into Xerox prints and embellished with an elaborate array of squiggles, dots and curlicues applied with colored felt tip pens.

This was followed by Polaroid portraits, enlarged and grouped in a single frame. They were almost more painting than photography as she seized every opportunity to heighten the color and emphasize the pattern in the subject's clothing or the wallpaper in the background.

"I have to fight this weakness I have for Matisse-like patterns and decoration. I just love the stripes, dots and flowers in fabrics. I could go on doing it forever but I don't want to repeat myself."

To keep marching forward, she has set

herself a difficult task; to create a new fusion of word and image by holding back on both. Just as Jasper John's 1958 painting of three American flags raised the maddening question of whether a flag made of paint is a painting or a flag, Astman works are portraits that are not quite portraits and dramas that are not really dramas.

There are great popular songs whose words and music could not bear independent analysis. Henry Fonda combines a laid-back performance with a flat delivery to create a role of great power and eloquence.

Yet the tension that is supposed to flow from this paradox never gets sufficiently amplified in Astman's case to really make the heart leap. She has not yet found the right combination of words and music. But with her drive, energy, imagination and flair she is more than likely to come across it some day in the near future.

Meanwhile, it is an interesting exhibit with all kinds of growth signs. You really ought to see it for yourself to find out what it does for you.