

Astman's fruitful metaphor probes the beauty of aging

By DEIRDRE HANNA

Barbara Astman reveals her inner life and obsessions in slick photographic tableaux that strike a fine balance between artful staging and emotional rawness.

It's a risky combination that, under Astman's careful control, makes for accessible and articulate imagery. It's brought her elegant work to the forefront of Toronto's art scene, and gained her steady gigs teaching at the Ontario College of Art and showing with one of the city's top dealers.

Her new Fruit Series moves away from the literalness of self-portraiture and autobiographical texts of her past work to mine a rich vein of visual metaphor using ripening and rotting fruit.

Astman took ordinary fruit — apples, peaches and plums — put them in wooden crates filled with dirt, and photographed them twice a week for a year to document the effects of time. She then took oversized enlargements of these unconventional photos and painted over the background with a rich, roughly textured mixture of encaustic (melted wax) and earth.

The images are strikingly beautiful. As the fruit ages, the pristine surfaces deepen in colour and soften to ripeness, gradually becoming mottled with lustrous moulds. The deep orange-red spheres of fruit seem to float against the rugged surface.

"I was interested in the aesthetics of aging," Astman says while packing the work to be shipped from her west end studio to her Yorkville gallery. "This isn't a science project, it's the poetics of decay.

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THE FRUIT SERIES: Barbara Astman, Sable Castelli Gallery (33 Hazelton). Opening Saturday (September 8), from 3 to 6 pm, and running to September 29. 961-0011.

"I laid the fruit in the dirt and left them to age. I don't think of the process as decay, because at various stages through the aging process the fruit are extremely beautiful. Even dried up, the fruit are lovely objects."

Poetic mementos

In exploring these poetics, Astman is drawing on a long tradition of *memento mori* still life painting, like the gorgeous Dutch baroque flower arrangements being eaten by insects. It's a metaphor Astman has latched onto because she no longer feels comfortable directly baring her soul in her art.

"My work used to reveal a lot of me — sometimes too much," Astman sighs. "I used to get off on going out and being seen everywhere, but once I had children I felt the need to be more discrete. The emotional process of making a family made me need more privacy. I'm glad I did the more revealing pieces when I did, because I could never do them now."

But the new work still draws heavily on Astman's most intimate concerns. The process of making

the images is extremely domestic — she melts the encaustic in an electric frying pan, and smooths it on the picture surface with a household flat iron — and the abstract imagery exorcises some deep-rooted anxieties.

Steamy tool

"I suspect," Astman laughs, "that it wouldn't occur to most male artists to think of a steam iron as a hot, flat tool.

"This whole series is about the aging process. You have two kids, turn 40, and realize you're not a young woman anymore. There is a metaphor in the aging of the fruit, and I wanted to show the *beauty* in it.

"I'm glad I've done so much mixed media work in the past, because it's given me the freedom to play with this technique. Artists get to a point in their careers when it becomes hard to fail. The pressure is on to do shows, and failing publicly is too humiliating. The work gets self-conscious because of the fear, and you lose the ability to play. Letting go of that fear is very rejuvenating.

"It's a wonderful feeling to paint again. There's something so removed about photography — you get behind a camera and click — and I really got into *feeling* the process of painting with hot wax. For the first time in years I'd wake up excited by the idea of going to the studio." ●



Photographer Barbara Astman's visually compelling, manipulated Polaroids of fruit in the process of aging reveal the artist's fascination with the beauty of change and the natural passage of time.