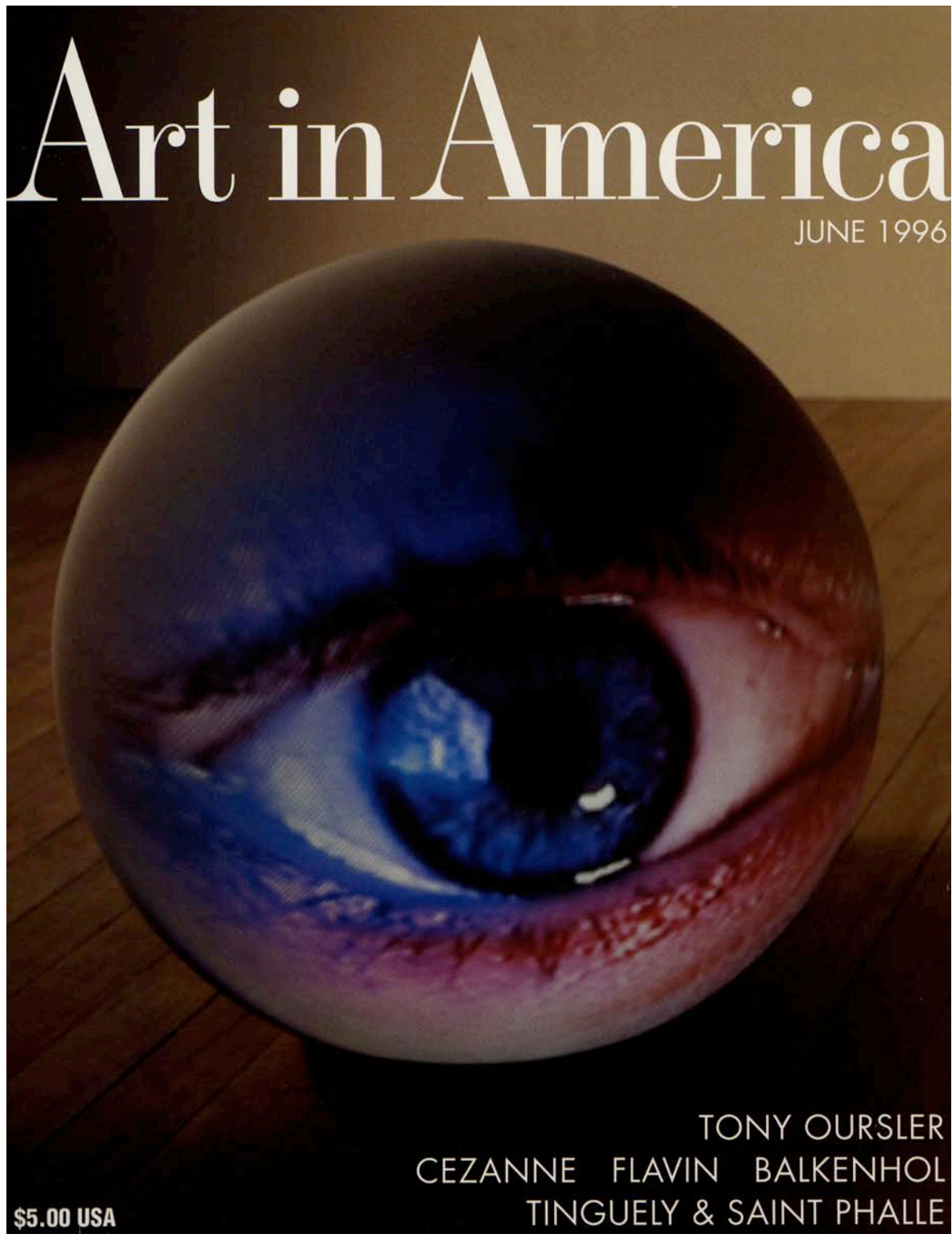


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Optic Nerve

Widely known for his lifelike video projections on cloth dummies, Tony Oursler recently showed a new body of work that explores the dynamics of perception through close-up scrutiny of the human eyeball.

BY HOLLAND COTTER



View of Tony Oursler's exhibition, 1996, video projections of eyes on 13 painted fiberglass globes with accompanying sound tracks, 1996; at Metro Pictures.



Magnified eyes blinked and shifted and stared around the darkened gallery in Tony Oursler's recent Metro Pictures show. One floating in a corner was red and swollen and wept unconsolably; another, at floor level, looked fixed and vacant. A third, suspended high overhead, darted restlessly in its socket as if tracking a moving target. The sound of a faint static crackle filled the air.

The eyes—13 in all—were color video images projected onto large, hollow, white-painted fiberglass globes; the noise issued from a variety of accompanying taped sound tracks. Together they marked a forward step in the career of a 37-year-old New York-born artist who presented a related and much-praised series of installations combining video, sculpture, conceptual and performance art in the same gallery two seasons ago. Those earlier video-sculptures, which quick-

ly became fixtures on the international exhibition circuit (Oursler's work has so far enjoyed a higher profile in Europe than in America), were lively, garrulous, theatrical affairs. Composed of stuffed cloth dummies onto which talking heads were projected, each was accompanied by a taped script written by Oursler himself.

The result was art that commanded attention, literally. "Hey, you!" shouted one male face to no one in particular from across the room. "What are you looking at?" snapped an angry woman trapped under a mattress. "I can't tell whether I'm alive or dead," moaned a male face pickled like a laboratory specimen in a glass jar. Each character was trapped in its own Punch-and-Judy sitcom, apparently beaten into submission by malign fate.

The often assaultive tone and jumped-up volume of the work owed

a big debt to Bruce Nauman's video installations, while its mock-pathetic content made a bow to Mike Kelley, a friend and collaborator from Oursler's student days at the California Institute of the Arts. All three artists share as their target late-20th-century American culture, and all three find their distant source in the gene pool of European Surrealism.

Oursler's new installations continue to traffic in Surrealist weirdness, but they also move in a new direction. Visually stripped down, verbally less assertive, they rise above the level of anecdote and buttonholing immediacy to the cooler, more suggestive realm of metaphor.

The figure has been reduced to a single eye shot close up in brief video loops (several of the eyes belong to artists—Gary Simmons, Kiki Smith and Constance DeJong—while Oursler's regular performer, Tracy Leipold, appears more than once). When one stood among the eyeballs they had the look of a single installation: a technological Argos, maybe, or a watchful galaxy. In fact, each sphere was a discretely conceived and titled piece and, as a query to the gallery revealed, each eye's pupil and iris holds a flickering reflection of what the sitter was looking at when filmed.

In most cases, the object of attention, it turns out, was video or film itself in one form or another—a television show, a porn movie, a video game. In the piece titled *Daytime*, Simmons channel-surfs through a string of TV cartoons and reruns; canned laughter and theme jingles make the installation tape a lunatic hash, though his eye seems barely to register the rapid changes of fare. In *Trance*, Smith watches a video performance by the rock group Sonic Youth, her impassive gaze contrasting to the heated music. Some of the performers' responses are more animated. Kristin Lucas's glance skitters around frenetically as she follows the Atari game in front of her, and William Trembly's underlighted eye in *Eye Witness* alternately squints and widens as he switches from one adrenalin-pumping TV news report of violence to another.

Retinal activity is also lively in the three pieces which take multiple personality disorders as their theme. In one the watching eye reflects a TV screen playing a 1957 Hollywood potboiler about "schizophrenia" titled *Three Faces of Eve*; another concentrates on Sally Field's performance in the made-for-TV *Sybil*, whose title character alternates identities with dazzling alacrity. The results are funny but also vaguely disquieting. The repeated but understated hints of violence and the emotional distancing of aural and visual sensation received at second (and for the show's viewer, third) hand through the filter of technology suggest that "vision" in Oursler's reading has complex meanings.

As part of a generation of artists that grew up on a steady diet of television, Oursler is keenly aware of the way that medium shapes our perception of the world. The eyes in his installations are anxious or dull or entranced, but in almost every case the stimulant they're reacting to is artificial. Whether the subject is an evening newscast or a movie about psychosis, fact and fiction blur; reality has the flavor of a mini-series peppered with commercial breaks. And as to the notion of the eye as the window of the soul: does that weeping eye in the corner belong to a friend in distress or to an actor trained to cry on cue? It is impossible to tell.

If popular media—films, TV, made-for-TV movies—have a warping effect on the culture at large, as Oursler seems to suggest, they certainly have repercussions for art. In an era when camcorders are ubiquitous and everyone has the means to document and dramatize their own lives, video art's cool, verité edge is seriously blunted. Even within the confines of the art world itself there are problems. Straightforward video simply takes up too much time to suit the reduced attention span of the average gallery-hopper. Like several other innovative artists working in the medium—Nauman, Nam June Paik, Gary Hill and Diana Thater are only among the most visible—Oursler has come up with a shrewd solution. He's created installations that are entertaining and accessible, short (each of his videos is a 15-minute loop), but designed to reveal their complexities slowly.

Technologically, there's no mystery. His recording hardware is low-tech, home-movie stuff: a camera mounted on a tripod with an audiotape picking up the sounds in the room when the video was made. At the same time, exactly this lack of polish gives the work a resistant texture. The eye-reflected images are hard to make out, the sound tracks are full of static. Viewers interested enough to linger over the work at all are forced to move close and listen hard.

When they do, they find much to think about. Oursler's pieces are little morality tales of postmodern life, emblems of control and complacency. They turn the ubiquitous "gaze" of recent art theory into a hapless set of Pavlovian tics. They suggest a culture of fragmentation without getting heavy-handed. And while the earlier puppet-style pieces (two small examples were included in the Metro show) are still crowd-pleasers, the new works find Oursler moving into riskier terrain.

What he'll do with it is hard to say. He's one of the rare artists (Nauman, Jonathan Borofsky and Rebecca Horn are others) who's come up with a kinetic gimmick that seems content to call itself a gimmick, a concept

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Submerged, 1995-96, video projection with sound (featuring performance by Tracy Leipold), wood, Plexiglas, ceramic, water, 53 by 11 by 11 inches. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

that's usually a no-no in a high art context but has an active life in folk art. But then, Oursler's connection to popular culture is as uncondescending as it is critical. And at a time when there is much talk of the merger of popular culture and contemporary art (with art, at this point, being the main beneficiary), an artist like Oursler might be able to bring off a successful crossover. □

The Tony Oursler exhibition appeared at Metro Pictures, New York [Apr. 20-May 25]. A solo show is scheduled for the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego [July 7-Oct. 20], and works by the artist will also appear in "Tony Oursler, Jeff Wall, Matthew Barney" at the Goetz Foundation, Munich [beginning July 20].

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