

Kandel, Susan. "Facing an Encounter With Surrealist Edge." *Los Angeles Times*, 7 March 1997, p. F20.

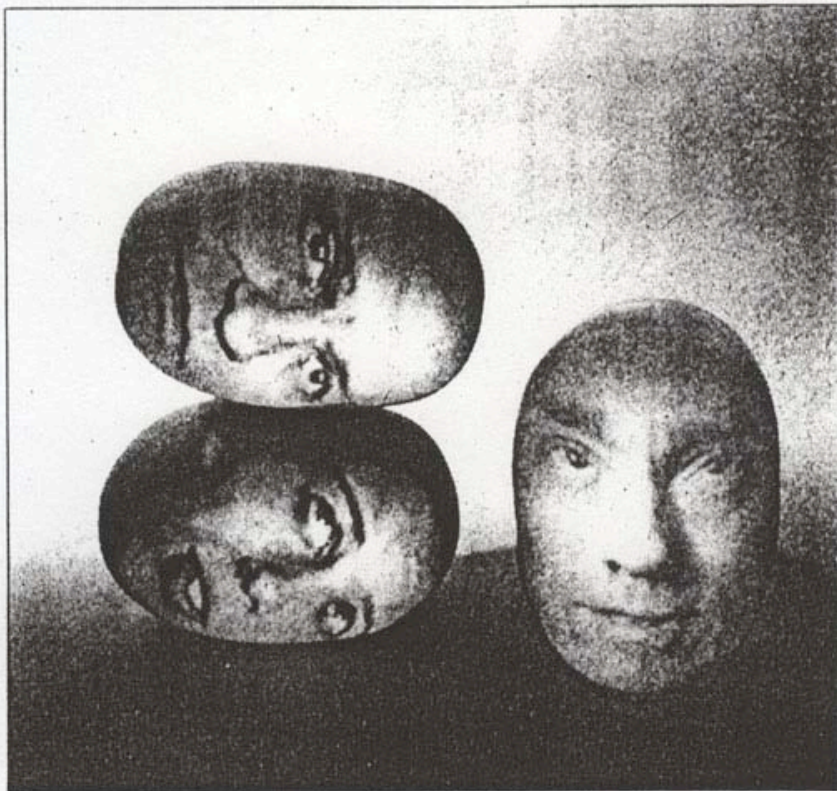
Tony Oursler has become well-known in the last several years for his crudely stuffed fabric dolls, whose faces are composed of video projections of actual people hurling abuse, mouthing creative invective or flinging garden-variety taunts at the viewer. Posed in corners, half-smashed under mattresses or submerged in tanks of water—and alternately pitiful and loathsome—the dolls suck you into psychodramas that are all the more seductive for their artifice.

Oursler's newish work at Margo Leavin Gallery is still edgy, though no longer desperate to provoke, which seems to be a good thing. Massive disembodied eyes dart back and forth, blink dramatically or, worst of all, fix their stares.

Projected onto large fiberglass spheres that hover in the darkened gallery space or cower in corners, these video images were shot while various people were watching various things on TV (you can sometimes make out the reflections in the pupils of the eye). They incarnate the truism that the eye is the mirror of the soul—the soul, that is, in thrall to a media spectacle.

The spectacle is all about distraction. So, logically, the room is filled with a not quite grating medley of discordant, mostly indecipherable sounds. Ambient noise intermingles with more insistent narratives emanating from several other works, in which eyes, faces and sometimes just mouths are projected onto animal body parts ensconced in glass jars.

Like Frankenstein's monsters hell-bent on revenge, these animated viscera (sheep's brains, bulls' testicles, hearts) bare their teeth, cackle, rationalize their be-



Margo Leavin Gallery

"Untitled," by Tony Oursler: Edgy, but no longer desperate to provoke.

havior in studied shrink-speak and murmur things like, "Don't be scared. Come a little closer." When you do come closer, you are rewarded with a chill running down your spine.

Like Bruce Nauman, Oursler uses video to stage encounters rather than to facilitate passive spectatorship. This immediately sets him up for charges of gimmickry, which may have been justified in the past.

However, in this show, and es-

pecially, in a final installation involving flickering colored lights and a soundtrack that teases out their metaphorical significance, Oursler begins to sketch out Surrealist poetics. This is not to say that things are more benign, but rather that they've been sublimated more cunningly.

■ Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603, through April 12. Closed Sundays and Mondays.