

art

## PUT 'EM TOGETHER AND WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?

HIRSCH PERLMAN  
at Donald Young, through March 16

By Fred Camper

Abstract and narrative film- and video makers alike have long tried to synchronize music and image, as in Disney's *Fantasia* or Oskar Fischinger's abstract films. But such amalgams are arguably artificial, because a projected moving image and music are too fundamentally different to blend. Ernie Kovacs deliciously parodied the absurdity of such combines, even—especially—when the synchrony is perfect, in a "city symphony" video of streets coming to life at dawn, unexpectedly and hilariously matched with Bartok's complex *Concerto for Orchestra*. Hirsch Perlman's four videos at Donald Young are in such a tradition.

The first video in *Two More Affect Studies* is quite strong, a mix of belief and self-parody. (The second, rapidly cut stills of road imagery set to Miles Davis's "Pinocchio," might have benefited from an awareness of such avant-garde filmmakers as Robert Breer and Pat O'Neill, whose densely layered films are also beautifully structured.) Three narrow horizontal bands of images literalize Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line," written in 1956 when he was newly married: "I keep a close watch on this heart of mine. . . . Because you're mine, I walk the line." The top band shows a train traveling across a landscape, the middle a strip of desert moving in the opposite direction, and the bottom flickering images of a road's white centerline. But the video is pointedly artificial: the desert landscape is clearly a digitized still image that Perlman repeatedly scrolls past, and the train is from another part of the same still. Even the white centerline is a human construction. And yet there's a kind of sincerity behind these three visions of linearity, which go so well with Cash's sonorous voice; monogamy seems both admirable and absurd. This blend of sincerity and parody is key to the exhibit.

*Two Affect Studies*, made a bit ear-

lier than *Two More Affect Studies*, is set to music in a way that's both reverent and playful. In the first, smoke rises from cigarettes in an ashtray to Samuel Barber's slow, sensuous *Adagio for Strings*, the movement matching the music so smoothly at times as to seem both sublime and ridiculous. In the second, Thelonious Monk's "Functional" accompanies stills of a rubber band poised above a measuring tape. (Perlman made the stills from videos of a rubber band he snapped repeatedly.)

Perlman—42, a former Chicagoan now living in Los Angeles—had an interest in jazz in his teens, he told me, long before he was making fine art, and this piece seems cognizant of the jazz aesthetic: he cuts on some important beats and not others in a sensitive attempt to illuminate the music's structure, though the image itself is somewhere between wry and silly. The tape seems present to measure the rubber band, yet its three-dimensional, variable curves obviously would elude reduction to numbers. The measuring tape is even more jarring in conjunction with the unpredictable music—Monk would speak of having played the "wrong wrong notes" rather than the right wrong notes. Rubber band, ruler, music—each element is legitimate but incompatible with the others, and their juxtaposition leaves the viewer both mesmerized and divided.

Perlman's third piece at Young is an installation at once hilarious and frightening, childlike yet disturbingly hermetic and obsessive. One gallery is filled with 57 black-and-white prints showing a spare bedroom in the house he's rented since 1995. The room is filled with cardboard, paper, and other detritus; in most of the photos, these materials have been shaped into one or more crude life-size humanoid figures.

Each photo has a sequential title—for example, *Day 167.2* indicates the second photo made on the 167th day of the project. (So far there are only 172 days, because though Perlman began the project in 1998 he only counts days he actually worked in the room. And though he's taken about 500 pictures, he's printed only 57 negatives so far.) He makes the figures out of cardboard and other materials, sometimes dismantling his humanoids to create new ones.

The photos suggest an artist who walls himself off from others in order to play. Yet is the artist in control? The mounds of junk surrounding the figures—corrugated cardboard, Styrofoam peanuts, bubble wrap, zip ties, clothesline, wire, temporary fencing—make it seem this stuff has congealed on its own into disturbingly humanlike shapes, inanimate matter coming to life as monsters. The figures are sometimes posed as if walking or facing each other in conversation, and at other times sit passively or, more disturbingly, hang from the ceiling. Many are in stages of partial completion—or dissolution. Even though the photos are not installed in chronological order, you can see the evolution of the project from the numbers—inferring, for example, that Perlman pulled his initial cardboard figures apart and reused the materials to create a giant head, at once scary and funny, that appears and reappears.

Perlman began by making a single cardboard-and-duct-tape figure in 1998 without knowing where he was headed. He recalls spending a lot of time building things alone as a child



PHOTO | JOSHUA WHITE

"DAY 23.4" BY HIRSCH PERLMAN

(though recently he's made videos with actors). The photos are taken with pinhole cameras he makes himself, and his "media" are mostly packing materials that come into his home with mail or purchases. Perlman sometimes "decapitates" his figures, he says, and replaces the heads with his camera, taking pictures from that vantage point—which may account for their sense of engagement.

The room feels sealed off—and indeed no one but Perlman had been in it for some time until last year when he was required to admit his landlord and a building inspector. (Perlman's girlfriend once put a sign on the door that read "Bluebeard's Private Room. KEEP OUT! This means you.") The viewer ends up both disturbed by this apparent pathological case and amused by the artist's parody of artistic self-indulgence.

There's a nearly alchemical power to the metamorphoses of Perlman's quotidian rubbish. Indeed, he says that he has an interest in "bouncing back and forth" between the experience of being "fully in" a work and the "self-reflexive process" of looking at it. The flip-flop goes beyond an alternation between gravitas and levity—the viewer is also encouraged to question his relationship to, and distance from, the art object. The synchronous or disparate elements in the videos raise epistemological questions: how do we understand images or music or both together? The photographs raise similar issues, making us wonder how we apprehend a story from this fragmentary record. This is conceptual art at its best, at once enjoyable and thought provoking.