

Todd Hebert at Mark Moore Gallery

*Beauty soon grows familiar to the lover,
Fades in his eye, and falls upon the sense.*

—Joseph Addison,
Cato (1713)

At what point do we get too close to an object to make sense of it? When does intimacy or proximity cause the spectator to lose the focus of her or his observation? These questions can be heady or gut wrenching depending upon personal experience, but despite the perspective it is a time-honored deliberation. Over the centuries the concept of propinquity—too close for comfort—has evolved into a metaphor for familiarity and its pitfalls. It is also rich ground for creative expression. The idea that loss is inherent in intimacy, or the supposition that affinity can deaden the senses, has been explored (unremittingly) in song and poetry for ages.

Increasingly, it is a topic for contemporary visual art which has developed its own code for depicting and deciphering the too close for comfort metaphor. And its primary visual device is the blur—the view that results from a focus on, or an illusion of, a too close positioning of a viewer relative to a situation or scene. The blur has evolved into a conceptual and empirical equation for loss—loss of detail, loss of information, loss of status, loss of value. Contemporary photographers like Todd

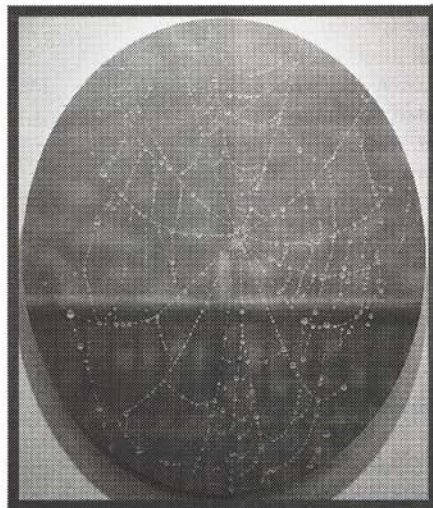
Gray and Uta Barth come to mind as artists who have mined this field. Gray shot a series of close-ups of a Mickey Mouse figurine through a smear of Vaseline to give us a blurred view of a tiny kitsch icon and Barth has been known to lose all object representation in her eerie pictorial fogs. In the latter, the viewer loses all clues of the original vantage point. Perhaps the clues are hidden in the titles—language overriding the image?

A too close or very close positioning of the viewer relative to the subject is also the ground examined by Todd Hebert. However, unlike Gray and Barth, Hebert is a painter who imbues his works with a surreal twist that sometimes includes a foreground in superb focus. For example, his acrylic painting, *Dew, Bottle*, features an exquisitely detailed spider web as the foreground. It is bedecked with photorealistic dewdrops. The viewer is drawn through the web to an out of focus bottle perched on a fence railing. The bottle is the focal point, but the viewer is unable to decipher the details or determine the significance of the object. Yet, Hebert is an amazingly precise painter, an illustra-

tor—capable of representing his subject with extreme accuracy. His determination to blur a portion of the view is a directive. He is pushing the viewer into a confrontation with his particular smear, be it the edge of a snowball or a water bottle teetering on a railing in the distance.

Hebert does not seem interest-

ed in portraits—no blurred views of icons, loved ones, the lovelorn, precious scenes or non-scenes can be found in his paintings. Instead, the work currently on display at Mark Moore Gallery presents soft-focused everyday objects, bottles and





Todd Hebert, (top) *Dew, Bottle*, 2005, acrylic on canvas over wood, 48" x 40"; bottom: *Chinatownland with Sinkhole and Stake*, 2005, colored pencil, graphite on paper, 11" x 30-1/4", at Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica.

snowballs abound. Yet, his particular smear is always an object with figurative possibility. The items he shows us are easily deciphered as stand-ins for a human body, clear examples of personification. The analogy, the link to the metaphoric equation—closeness equals loss—is readily accessible. And the loss in question, because of the figurative objects, can be traced to human inaction. The paintings seem to be a less than optimistic analysis of relationships. He is joining ranks with the poets and songwriters and asking us to look again at relationships. Nearness as the route to loss is a disturbing equation and Hebert's works push us recognize its potential.

—Charlene Roth

Todd Hebert: *Pretty Close* closed October 12 at Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica.

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