

# Letter from New York

May 1999

"You might think Aesthetics is a science telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes well." Although Wittgenstein delivered these words in 1938, it is now, in the year 1999, that they seem so resoundingly true. Art is a language that communicates knowledge; it is an individual's perception of what the world is – what counts, what matters, what the rest of us should take notice of. While sometimes beautiful, art is just as often not beautiful, and neither condition affects its status as art.

Two exhibitions in New York City point to these different ways of making art. The first, David Nyzio at Postmasters Gallery (closed March 13), is the essence of beauty. The other, Stan Douglas at the Dia Art Center (to June 13), has nothing to do with "beauty" and yet suffers none for that. Art aestheticizes our awareness.

Nyzio works with a variety of materials that include butterfly wings and cyanobacteria (blue-green algae). While seemingly aesthetically different, these are as delicate and stunningly beautiful as nature has to offer. Nyzio grows his cyanobacterial images by submersing paper (or glass) in a mixture of water and bacterial culture, and suspending a black-and-white-format negative above the paper. Because algae is light responsive, it grows into a photographic image when light is projected through the negative onto the paper. Nyzio observes the microscopic beauty of natural processes, the mind-boggling complexity in the smallest of biological details. The things that are never noticed are held up to our vision by Nyzio's art, giving microscopic balance to our macroscopic clumsiness.

Douglas's work is social in content. In this current video installation, *Win, Place, or Show*, Douglas projects two video images of the identical scene of two men talking/fighting in a living room. The videos, shot from slightly different angles, are projected onto large, adjoining screens (each about 10 x 13 feet) so that their joint images almost simulate bipolar vision.

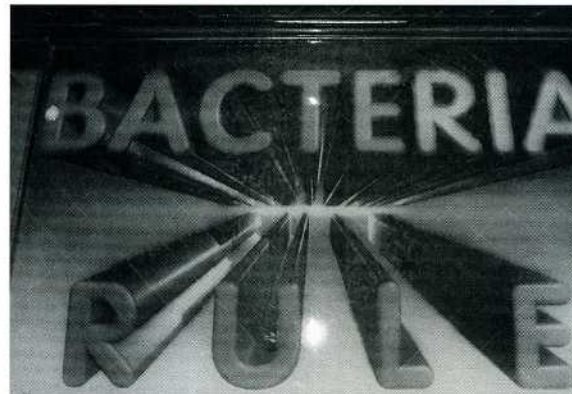
What's seen in this instance is the slice of a relationship between two men (friends? lovers? relatives?) that's alternately tense, violent and sympathetic. In a conversation that revolves around money and the lack of

it, with the older man accusing the younger of fecklessness and not pulling his financial weight, bad feelings escalate to bad actions, and the two men are soon slugging it out like public-school kids. Horse-betting is suggested as a remedy, but even this is couched in blame and acrimony.

Here, beauty is absent, for it is simply not the point; our perceptual faculties operate with mechanical precision even while the emotional content is skewed. As humans, we are both complex and thug-gish, both sympathetic and violent. The probabilities of betting are an apt metaphor.

The crowd pleaser of all time, Cindy Sherman, opens a show at Metro Pictures (May 15 – June 26), an exhibition that will probably shock and delight as faithfully as all her others.

Dena Shottenkirk



From top: David Nyzio, *43 Days of Growth Under the Influence of Bacteria Rule*, 8/23/98–10/8/98 (1998), filamentous cyanobacteria *oscillatoria* on white glass, 46 x 69 in, photo courtesy Postmasters Gallery / Stan Douglas, still from *Win, Place or Show* (1998), video installation, photo courtesy Dia Center for the Arts