

Art As Total Imperfection

by Patricia Stewart

Tom Hatten is well into the third year of a ten-year plan. Every week, he turns out two portraits - one of himself and one of Xochitaol, his model, wife, collaborator and familiar. Every year he adds a new color to his palette. The paintings were black and white the first year. Yellow got in the second. This year it was blue. The last color will be red, because it's the color of blood and "the life-giving color". Hatten seems to have thought of using symbolism, and a whole lot else besides.

The finished project will be a documentation of all the different "social masks" the two subjects have worn. The documentation goes on documenting itself in almost parodistic little circles. Polaroids of all the portraits are kept in chronological notebooks - a pretty obsessive sort of family album. I can't think of anything else at all like it except Queen Victoria's catalogues of her possessions: "Every single article in the Queen's possession was

photographed from several points of view. These photographs were submitted to her Majesty, and when, after careful inspection, she had approved of them, they were placed in a series of albums richly bound...The fate of every object which had undergone this process was henceforth irrevocably sealed."

Maybe Hatten's whole series is documenting a deadpan, cartoonish version of the history of some other painter. When I asked why he started out with black and white, he gravely replied, "A black and white period is an accepted standard."

He explained that the selection of work for the Nexus exhibition completed the life cycle of an image. The image is a pedestal: the first one appeared in 1974 at the Institute of Contemporary Art; pedestals filled an exhibition at Alessandra Gallery in New York earlier this year; the end of the line was at Nexus. Of his project, Hatten says, "It appears that it is going to be the only painting period that I shall have." When they're finished, the portraits will fill a

gallery a third of a mile long. The ramp at the Guggenheim is, unfortunately, too short. (I remember that when the big Duchamp exhibition was on in 1974, people said after a good joke, "Marcel would have liked that".) Hatten admires certain Egyptian dynasties, he says, because of "their attempt to create an absurd amount of art—an absurd amount of information."

THE IMAGES ARE extraordinarily varied. They seem to take advantage of every possible device of confrontation and evasion. A lot of them are very frontal, flat and accessible, but in one picture only the mouth and the hand — emblems of speech and gesture — are left behind

The figures shift from one imaginary distance to another. Usually they sit decorously inside their frames, but sometimes they make a getaway outside a framing edge. Some of them withdraw into pictures within the picture. In a few paintings, the figure vanishes completely. Hatten calls that "a 'You're going to miss me when I'm gone' canvas".

Some of the paintings are three-quarter views of three-quarter length figures, as gracefully brushed as any well-bred European portrait. Others are striated like the faces of the figures from Picasso's most primitivizing period. Sometimes these stylistic quotations crash head-on inside the same picture. Hatten seems to be confusing as many issues as he can get his hands on.

Perceptually, it's very disorienting to look through the whole series. These are portraits of Hatten and Xochitaol, but they start looking like family and friends and Vincent Van Gogh and Natalie Wood in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Resemblances appear and disappear like shades in the smoke of a Homeric hell.

A PORTRAIT doesn't need to make a resemblance. What it needs to do is to make or fit a type. Portraits get so confused with the sitters that you find yourself calling them "he" or "she" rather than "it". Picasso must have been thinking of how the image replaces the subject when he made his rather grim comment on his portrait of Gertrude Stein. "Everybody thinks she is not at all like her portrait but never mind, in the end she will manage to look just like it." The point of portraiture is not to produce a resemblance, but an image. One good one.

Hatten is systematically disproving his own beautifully constructed system. The more likenesses you get, the less reliable they are. "An absurd amount of information". Too much to tell you something.

In one of the portraits, Xochitaol's face is replaced by an inscription. "A black diamond is the heart of the sun". Hatten had planned a black diamond as a gift to Xochitaol. He says — he always speaks in a very careful, delicate elaboration of clauses — "To have a piece of what is considered to be almost total imperfection would be, I imagine, quite nice." ■



A Hatten family portrait, confrontation vs. evasion.