

TIME OUT
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Bill Jacobson, *Songs of Sentient Beings*
#1588, 1995.

**Bill Jacobson,
"Songs of Sentient Beings"**
Julie Saul, through Mar 23
(see *Photography*).

Bill Jacobson is the creator of some of the most haunting and resonant images in current photography. His 1992 debut exhibition, "Interim Portraits," featured soft-focus figures that were recognizably queer. These seemingly threatened bodies would appear and disappear into and out of diaphanous white or inky black grounds: And like the man cruising you from across a steam room, they looked great in the fog. At a time when the lives of gay men feel especially precarious,

these images were poignant testimonials to the melding of fear and desire.

In this new series, with its Whitmanesque title, Jacobson's work is more complicated and difficult to apprehend. He's increased his scale, included women (though many are androgynous), focused on isolated areas of the body and limited the number of images—effectively suggesting a single installation piece. While survival and desire are still dominant themes, the fragmentation of sexual and psychological identity are now also part of the narrative. Jacobson uses his signature manipulations of focus to distort his subjects in an almost painterly mode. The attenuated figures, with limbs like flames or wisps of smoke, recall both Ingres's odalisques and the aliens from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. While the meaning here is rather ambiguous, the use of the word *sentient* in the exhibition title is a clue. These beings are indeed *aware* of what they are going through, and like canaries in a mine shaft, their fragility serves as a reminder of our own mortality. Although I am reluctant to attach a spiritual cliché to this work, I sense a promise of transcendence. Jacobson's lens probes beyond the flesh into some unnamed and invisible aspect of the self.

I do miss the specifically queer content of the earlier work, and I wonder if these images seem little more than beautiful now that they're less focused on gay concerns. But Jacobson has taken a chance with this show, and when an artist of his caliber shifts strategies, it is exciting to watch.—*Bill Arning*