

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER  
MAY 25, 1995

DAVID BONETTI

## Bill Jacobson's elegiac images at the Koch

THE PHOTOGRAPHS in Bill Jacobson's "Interim Portraits and Figures" at the Robert Koch Gallery, 49 Geary St. (through July 1), are quietly eerie, leading the viewer to contemplate fate and the brevity of life. In a brief manifesto, the New York-based artist writes that the images are "a statement about personal desire and collective loss, drawing on feelings around the tentativeness and vulnerability of life in the age of AIDS."

Without reading the statement, it is clear from the work itself that it is elegiac in nature, and elegy today more often than not means AIDS. The subjects of Jacobson's portraits are all handsome young men of apparently good health, and, whatever the cause, the fact that they are fading away before your eyes is disconcerting. Each of the nearly life-size heads, printed on the paper with the faintest of traces, seems to be in the process of drawing its last breath.

(Jacobson achieves his dreamlike effect by setting his camera on soft-focus, but also by printing his black-and-white negatives on color paper, which gives his subjects a subtle color tone.)

These restrained portraits are emotionally affecting, and they pretend to give the viewer privileged entrée into the moment between life and death. The series is well named. Interim refers to "the period of time between," and these pictures capture the existential sense of human life as the brief episode between birth and death in the Beckettian sense that we are born over the grave. The pictures gain their power in their universality. Inspired by AIDS, they are about human fate: We all must die.

Jacobson's figure photographs, of men reclining in a nebulous, washed-out environment are less effective than his portraits. With a little more definition, they could serve as seductive images in a fancy ad campaign. But the portraits are remarkable. Just when you thought that AIDS as a subject for artists was exhausted, Jacobson demonstrates that the epidemic can still inspire artists to do extraordinarily affective work.

The Koch Gallery has matched Jacobson with veteran New York photographer Duane Michals, who also favors handsome young men as his subjects. Michals achieved a sort of legend by being among the first photographers to violate the sanctity of the print by appending extended captions to them and organizing them into narratives, and also by revealing the nature of his desire.

In his new series, "Questions Without Answers," the texts have gotten out of control. Michals sees himself as a philosopher, but his ideas are cornily New Agey and his versifying is frequently embarrassing. In "What Are Dreams?" for instance, he begins, "Dreams are the midnight movies of the mind, where the sphinx recites his riddles to the blind."

The shame is that his images still remain attractive and communicative. "What Is the Universe?" doesn't need his sappy philoso-

phizing. The hunky young man holding a silver star in one hand and a silver sun (or moon) in the other is all that's necessary.



Jacobson's dreamlike "Interim" portraits are nearly life-size.