Not Fade Away

Bill Jacobson
Julie Saul Gallery
560 Broadway
Through March 23

BY VINCE ALETTI

The first time I saw a group of Bill Jacobson's photographs, I bought one. Like the others in his 1993 show at the Amy Lipton Gallery, the picture was a portrait—or would have been if the subject's features were at all discernible. Shot in a focus so soft the results looked like a half-erased drawing, stripped of information and identity, the photo was of a man whose closely shorn head was bent forward over a bare chest. His eyes, his brows, were velvety smudges on a long oval shape, as suggestive and indistinct as one of Brancusi's notched rocks. I'm not sure why I chose this particular head over the others in the room—I remember another with the alarmed expression and open mouth hole of a rubber fuck doll—but its inarticulate sense of yearning and grief was powerful; like a memory, it seemed to be fading, but it refused to disappear.

You could argue that Jacobson's pictures, like so many modern portraits, were about the futility of truly capturing human likeness. And, I suppose, they could be lumped together with those postmodernist mug shots that signal loss of identity or alienation. But Jacobson seemed to be after something quite different and entirely more emotional, zeroing in on desire, loss, and the fragility of life in the age of AIDS. When the photograph I bought (a small version of the larger images on display, bargain-priced at $450) was delivered, it was even fainter than I remembered. Jacobson had slipped a sheet of vellum between the photo and the mat, pushing the figure even further into the psychic distance.

Later that same year, Jacobson's first local one-man show, at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, placed him pointedly alongside the homoerotic mid-century modernism of George Platt Lynes. Since then, his fuzzy everymen have become hauntingly ubiquitous, cropping up in group shows—25 are listed in his résumé—here and abroad, most often as metaphors for living and dying with AIDS. Some of Jacobson's work in this period has been soft and oversentimental; only a few pictures in his last show at Julie Saul—seminude male couples variously posed—had enough visual punch to overcome their absence of real feeling.

But the solitary figures not only reasserted themselves, they stood, suddenly, at the forefront of a whole population of soft-focus wraiths. With Barbara Ess as its visionary pioneer, the fuzzy school casts a wide net these days, including such masters of and dabblers in the mysteriously vague as Brian Weil, John Brill, Gary Schneider, Michal Rovner, Randy West, Uta Barth, and Robert Stivers. This style surge—mirrored by a parallel movement in graphic design—is partly a reaction to dead, digitized perfection, partly an embodiment of human impermanence. But it's the complicated emotional freight the work carries that makes it so resonant, and Jacobson still seems to carry it best.

"So many photographs put a rectangle or a frame around a fixed view of the world," Bill Jacobson says. "But for me, the world didn't feel fixed, didn't feel stationary or stable." We're sitting at the kitchen table in the big, high-ceilinged loft off Avenue B that serves as his studio, darkroom, and living space. He's put out a plate of cheese and crackers, made some herbal tea, and sketched in the story of his life. It's one of those stories gay men tell each other: a braid of career and coming out, success and self-discovery. Equally earnest and entertaining, wiry, soft-spoken, and alert to nuance, Jacobson is ready to jump from his birth (Norwich, Connecticut, 1955) to his graduation from Brown University before I force him to meander a bit in his childhood and adolescence. Among the things he turns up there: a summer in France at age 15 and, the following year, his father's copy of the Diane Arbus book, both of which opened his eyes to the world outside his small town.

With a 35mm camera from his father, Jacobson turned into a teen shutterbug and, later, broke up courses at Brown with photo workshops at the nearby Rhode Island School of Design and a junior year at the San Francisco Art Institute. After graduation, he landed in Seattle taking newsphotos and doing layout for the *Seattle Gay News*. For a year, he took pictures at leather bars, gay rodeos, gay square dances, and lesbian coffeehouses in between working part time for a commercial photographer. "A wonderful education," he calls it, meaning the opportunity to meet the diverse sort of gay community he'd never connected with in San Francisco, but for something more formal, he returned to the Art Institute and, in 1982, decided he was ready to take on New York.

Jacobson's final project at the Institute was what he calls "a big series of 60 very, very tiny, very dreamlike pictures that set a direction for where my work would go. They weren't about describing a real place we know of but more like a state of mind, a head space, a dark mystery." Included in the series were some of his first fuzzy images, some shot through dirty glass. But New York in the '80s wasn't exactly panting for tiny, out-of-focus photographs, so Jacobson put his personal work aside and made good money taking pictures of other artists' increasingly massive paintings and sculpture. He worked steadily for BlumHelman, Pace, the Whitney, and Dia; he settled down with a boyfriend; he traveled to Europe. "I had never supported myself before," he says with a shrug. "I was trying out a different part of my brain."

That began to change seven years ago, when Jacobson followed up a 1989 New Year's resolution with a January day shooting outdoors and out of focus. He calls the hazy, nearly obliterated landscapes he produced over the next couple of years "Interim Landscapes" because everything about them felt transitory and unsure. When the figures in those landscapes began to absorb him more than their bleached-out surroundings, he tried isolating them, then started inviting people over to his studio to pose against white seamless paper. His 10-year relationship was starting to fall apart, he says, "And I think for me it was a way of bringing new people into my life."

But there's nothing romantic, nothing erotic about the "Interim Portraits" that Jacobson began turning out. Solitary, shadowy, caught somewhere between here and gone, Jacobson's men are the very specters of AIDS. Jacobson has described the work as "a statement about personal desire and collective loss, a drawing on feelings around the tentativeness and vulnerability of life in the age of AIDS." Though he now says that seeing his photos solely in terms of AIDS "closes down" their more universal connections, Jacobson can't shake the work's most potent metaphor.

But he can take it deeper. His latest pictures, part of a series he calls "Songs of Sentient Beings," work the same scary magic with sooty blackness that the earlier portraits did with their virtual whiteout. In the nine large pictures at Julie Saul now, Jacobson all but swallows up his subjects in lush, billowing darkness, reducing some to skeletons, others to abstract puffs of slate, charcoal, and platinum. A woman's head is no more than a pin; a pair of legs dangles like empty stockings; a sleeping figure becomes a white undulation, a brush stroke in the void. Nothing is permanent here, nothing solid; look closely at this flesh, and it melts in a gray mist. Jacobson has turned into Giacometti with a camera (and his prices, $2400 and $3500 for these huge prints, put him way out of my league). Fuzzy goes big time. ❖

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Going, going, gone: Bill Jacobson's *Song of Sentient Beings #1588* (1995)