



Kimberly Austin, from *Learning Normalcy*, 1997, gum bichromate prints, wood, steel, 20" x 20", at Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

Northern California

Kimberly Austin at
Braunstein/Quay
Gallery

The term "ambulatory schizophrenia," a state where one functions well enough to get by, but without actually forming

meaningful relationships, or relating to reality in an empathic, interactive way, goes far to describe contemporary art's visual products: the phantasmagorically overcoded cosmology of Mariko Mori's bionic replicants; the glambiguous, narcissistic greening of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* mythologies; and the cryptic, super-saturated hieroglyphics of Matthew Ritchie's cartographic Web sites all favor an introverted and imaginary world of manageable abstractions. Enshrouded in hermetic symbol systems, they leave us grasping for their embodied meanings and speculating on their formal seductions, while they maintain a comfortable distance from our potential rebukes. It is precisely this absence of infanticidal fear of reprisal cloaking itself in obscurity that gives Kimberly Austin's *Learning Normalcy* its blunt force.

Austin displays twenty-six wooden alphabet blocks (twenty-inch cubes) embossed with text and images, haphazardly stacked like pyramids or in simple columns, and finished with steel angles and brackets. Her text, culled from home health manuals, marriage and sex guides, and children's hygiene books from the turn of the century to the 1940s, evokes a

bureaucratic, authoritarian, almost militaristic tone: "The surest mode of securing health is by acquiring the most extensive possible knowledge of its derangements, and thus learning what noxious influences we must avoid."

The detached, forensic idiom of Austin's found text suggests fixed categories and simple formulas for proper adjustment and emotional health: "Pleasures kept within due bounds are good, but in excess are utterly subversive of health and happiness." Yet, when situated next to the images of an androgynous young boy, a partially unrolled condom, and a diaphanous, skeletal X-ray we experience the absurdity of their claim to authority—their inability to address and accommodate the fluid complexity of gender roles and sexual desire. When images of bridal innocence and fetishized corsetry threaten to displace or negate each other, the text is reduced to a fortune-cookie aphorism, quaint and non-threatening.

The images on Austin's blocks range from vanity objects (brushes, jewelry, nail polish), toys and miniatures (carved circus animals and doll house furnishings), adult sex toys (dildos, vibrators, condoms) to anatomy (photographed body parts and illustrations from early medical manuals). A nineteenth century vintage photographic technique that involves hand-mixed emulsions applied to natural papers creates the colorful gum bichromate prints which are then mounted on the wood blocks.

Learning Normalcy compels us to look, not through the random juxtaposition or arrangement of its parts gambling on synergistic effect, but through the sustained destabilization of its entire matrix of text and image, where binary readings of male/female, hetero/homo, and perverse/straight-laced are made obsolete. To this end, each form is treated in a non-hierarchical manner: an apple is rep-

resented as artfully as a nurse or a condom. Likewise, the gently faded sepia tones of Austin's portraiture (often a nostalgic gimmick) act as a form of regressive therapy, leading us back to childhood where a remedial lesson in "normal" identity reconstruction can begin.

Unlike Glenn Ligon, who makes text-based works which insert his personal biography into antebellum slave narratives ("The Life and Adventures of Glenn Ligon, a Negro who was sent to be educated among white people in the year 1866 when only about six years of age and has continued to fraternize with them to the present time"), Austin does not rely on ironic distancing, or deconstructive textual games. She doesn't need to. Her careful selection of absolutist rhetoric, left unembellished and unadorned, echoes the prescriptive sermons of Hawthorne's puritanical New England and more recently the edenic nostalgia of William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*—a revisionist history which attempts to locate itself in the simplified ideal of a kinder, gentler prelapsarian past.

For all the visual cues and signposts Austin provides, her work is never didactic or moralizing. She realizes that works of art will always lack cultural transparency, existing as they do as compensatory guides for our prodigious desires. Her grievance is the rigid legislation of those desires, and her art, a redressing of this imbalance.

—David Hunt

Kimberly Austin—*Learning Normalcy* closed in March at Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

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