

ART

SHARP SHOW

Four who create art from the "poor man's printing press."

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In 1937 Walter Benjamin wrote a seminal essay entitled "Art in the Age of Reproduction," which speculated on the impact of visual multiplicity brought to us by the machine. Confining himself to a consideration of the photograph and film, he noted the paradoxical loss of power that seemed inevitable for the "original" or singular work, and the spread of visual literacy, equally conceivable with mass reproduction. He didn't anticipate a machine as adaptable to artists' purposes as the copier.

Artists have been fooling around with them for over 20 years, and a flurry of copywork attended the introduction of color models about 10 years ago. But when those models disappeared from the marketplace, "xeroxography" declined.

Recently the Sharp Company introduced a full-color copier, spawning a bright idea for the Chrysler Museum's curator of photography, Brooks Johnson, who arranged for the machine to visit the studios

of four experimental artists, producing a show entitled *Four Sharp Artists*, now in the museum's Sol B. Frank gallery (through April).

Of the quartet, only Fay Zetlin had worked extensively with color copywork. Several years ago this indefatigable woman, formerly known as a painter, kept up with technology by pursuing color copiers throughout the state. She used the machines in a formal sense, but, more importantly, in a contextual way, focusing on the passage of information in a culture in transition from the Age of Industrialization to the Post-Industrial "Information" Era. Zetlin, ever poetic, has taken archaeological material (overlying glyphs from tribal sites with computer chips and NASA space shots) to blend the distant past with the future in prints that shimmer with potential.

A poetic historicist, Zetlin also connects in these new works with her own past. In most we can dimly see the artist warping the collages over the copy-glass; this centralized focus resembles the early paintings, in which a darker rift cut through luminous veils of color, exposing a depth at the heart. No matter what the tool, Zetlin reveals the secret core — and what else is our sense of history but a revelation of such secrets?

Like Zetlin, Ronn Ives is no copy-machine tyro, having tinkered with what he aptly terms "the poor man's printing press" for most of his career. An accomplished classical printmaker, Ives came to copiers for several reasons: relative inexpensiveness; ease of editioning; and most important, the copier's social context. Ives has built a national reputation on the mail-art circuit, producing an avalanche of low-cost, high-visibility information.

Oddly, he has chosen to use the Sharp CX5000 to produce *unique* collaged images, all of which have a diaristic, and thus personalized, content. What elevates the works above that, though, are the funny objects that jig across the surfaces. Ives is a pack-rat, savoring the bric-a-brac of our consumer culture, and all junksters among us will have corresponding fun with these often beautiful images. His phosphorescent blue-green radio is one of the show's highlights.

Sharon Garrison, like Ives, deals with the memorabilia of life, and has developed a theme for her copy-collages. Asking friends to collect their prized possessions for her, she set about blending these personal relics into prints full of the half-conscious "triggers" that fill our private histories — and eventually our attics. In doing this she reveals a woman's sensitivity to the past unique among the show's members.

Martin Johnson's penultimate wall presentation epitomizes the kind of expansive inclusiveness that characterizes contemporary culture. Collectively entitled *Ti Ecaf* (a mirror-imagery of sorts), these multiple, sandwiched faces, in the most shocking shades the copier can produce, are introduced by a Mona Lisa with a childlike grin (a motif which recurs throughout), and include Einstein, a Buddha, a gas-masked skull, and a Pre-Columbian idol. People crowd this wall, potential mechanistic fodder, cultural manipulations, art.

Perhaps these four artists — very sharp indeed — prove that the creative spirit is not inconsistent with the machine. It's just the latest tool after all.