

William Burroughs, in his introduction to Jimmy De Sana's book, *Submission*, describes De Sana's photographs as "medieval," "Christian," and "gloomy." Burroughs writes, "... behold the havoc wrought by Christianity, the whole panorama of guilt, fear, sin and punishment." His introduction is full of implications about the relationship of western culture to the rise of photography, and of photography to "pornography," but he doesn't exactly say what this Christian legacy has to do with De Sana as a photographer.

Burroughs' introduction is a writer's introduction. It's brief and elegant; like a true writer, he goes straight to the heart of his subject and talks about "meaning." However, if you're a critic, Burroughs' introduction raises a question. Can the critic say something about De Sana's pictures? Can you approach his work aesthetically? Or, supposing that criticism is irrelevant, is the subject matter of De Sana's photographs of such a nature as to make art criticism an act of hypocrisy?

There's no doubt that the "sexual content" of De Sana's photographs is close to the artist's own heart. You only have to look at one of his earlier pictures, a "staged" self-portrait (reproduced on the cover of a San Francisco magazine called *Vile*), to see that he understands and feels what he shoots. He shows himself nude, hanging from the ceiling by a rope tied around his neck. This picture is the kind that psychologists call "revealing," and it is revealing, not because of any psychological generalities that you might be able to make about De Sana on the basis of this self-portrait, but because we know that this picture shows an individual. It's not sex that "reveals" the person in the body, but the person's body that reveals sex.

This early self-portrait shows that "portraiture," whether present or absent, is the most important issue in De Sana's art when it comes to his concept of the "sex" picture. As a matter of fact, De Sana does take portraits, and good ones at that. His cover photo of Laurie Anderson for the *Soho Weekly News* (Nov. 5-11) is one of the best covers this newspaper has had. This picture is a brilliant portrait

Jimmy De Sana,
Gauze, 1979.
Courtesy Stefanotti
Gallery.



JIMMY DE SANA

because of the way in which he uses light: as a way of complementing the expression of the person, as "glamour," and as color. He's also taken some of the best and earliest photographs of new rock 'n' roll singers like James Chance, David Byrne and the Talking Heads, and Deborah Harry.

De Sana knows that the best photography being done today comes out of the conventions that make up photography in journalism, fashion, and "pornography." In his best pictures, such as *Sofa*, he creates a synthesis out of all three of these modes. However, what's unique about the way he creates this synthesis is his feeling for the "fleshiness" of the human body. The special thing about De Sana's straight "body" shots is that even though they're elegant ("elegant" in the same way that smooth, "skin" photographs by photographers like Weston or Penn are elegant), they nevertheless anticipate, with wit and understanding, the significance of what graffiti "artists" instinctively feel when they scrawl sexual and scatological markings on advertisements in the New York City subway system. Some people might term these "additional elements" (shoes, genitals, excrement, masks, etc.), which De Sana uses to bring out the inner life of the human flesh, an example of "fetishism." This may very well be the right term to describe this

phenomenon, but how these devices work pictorially is another matter. Let me describe some of the photographs in De Sana's recent show at the Stefanotti Gallery.

There were two types of pictures in this show: "portraits" and "body" photographs. (The one exception to these categories was the portrait of *Tommy Cote*, which shows his nude torso bathed in a red light.) The pictures themselves are either color photographs or scanographs (large "photographs" that are printed with paint by a computer-controlled laser beam). One of the basic ideas informing De Sana's "body" pictures is the practice of juxtaposing something mechanical or inanimate, like a car, shoes, plastic or toothpaste, against a nude human body. The portraits are informed by another idea whose effect complements what De Sana does to the body. He uses colored lights to illuminate his portraits. In the case of the "body" pictures, he uses hard objects to bring out the tenderness of human skin, and in the case of the portraits, he concentrates on bringing out the expression of the face rather than its form. This emphasis on expression and gesture is particularly apparent in the portraits of *Arto Lindsay*, *Kenneth Anger*, and *Lena Lovich*. De Sana's photographs of nude bodies, of course, are even more dramatic.

For instance, in the photo-

graph titled *Toothpaste*, De Sana has a nude young woman wearing white high-heeled shoes standing on top of a radiator that lies between two windows. The woman holds a white telephone receiver and her face is covered with white toothpaste. Across her body, De Sana, using white toothpaste, has drawn horizontal stripes that run parallel to the lines formed by the Venetian blinds, which cover the windows. The humor and the sense of play in this photograph are obvious; yet it's more than just a clever picture—we're still left with a beautiful model in a beautiful interior. The fact that De Sana can achieve in his best pictures such a fine balance between the vulgar and the beautiful is the paradox of his art. In another witty picture, titled *Instant Camera*, we see a nude woman with a camera, bending over to take a photo of a clothed man whose back is arched as he lies down. In another picture, we see a nude man's legs and penis under a table; what's more, one foot wears a man's shoes while the other is clothed in a woman's shoe. Described in this way, these photos may sound like they're just gag shots, but as pictures they're urbane. It may seem that De Sana is playing a joke with the innards of the human body, but in most of his photographs (and this is what impresses me the most about his art) he seems to sense that even the most degrading, neurotic fantasy can't betray the inherent biological dignity of the human body if we see it as an artist sees it—as an aesthetic fact.

Valentin Tatransky