

PHOTO

THE

By Esther Wanning

Scanamurals have a distinctly scanamural look: The scan lines show and the texture of the substrate is somewhat rough. Some like it, some don't. Some work with it. Jimmy DeSana paints on top of it. DeSana, a painter turned photographer, has had great success with what he calls "kinky imagery" (a nude wearing spike heels floating facedown in the water; lovers on the beach, wrapped in aluminum foil). "As just a color photographer, it's almost impossible to think about large-scale publicly funded works," he says. "I heard of the 3M process two or three years ago and tracked it down to Imero Fiorentino Associates, who are dealers in New York City.

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"I'm beginning now to use the scanamural as a ground for painting, but I don't paint over every square inch of canvas. The quality can be disappointing compared with the sharp photos I'm used to, which is one of the reasons I started painting over them. Before they just weren't quite there. Of course the bigger they get, the better they are. Now I'm applying to do a seventy-five-foot-long scanamural for a shopping mall." This would be large, but somewhere in Taiwan there's a scanamural 240 feet long: a history of aviation that was made for Boeing.

No, they were very sorry, they said, but the reporter could not see the Painting Computer in action. The reporter certainly might talk to the project head, they added, or other heads. The company would be happy to accommodate her in any way—short of letting her into The Presence. Thus spake the 3M Company, the only producer of scanamurals in the U.S.A.

Scanamurals are, in the world of photography, a giant step. Since 1826, when Joseph Nicéphore Niépce astonished and delighted the world with the very first photograph, the advances of photography have been multifold. But problems have remained. Size, for one. When enlarged, photographs tend to "break down" (become fuzzy, grainy, and ultimately unrecognizable). This is particularly true of color photographs. And so you don't see photographs the size of *The Last Supper* around, which is a source of chagrin to photographers who would like to compete with painters on every ground, including size. Durability is another problem. Because photographic

chemicals have to be light-sensitive, they are delicate. Black-and-white photos may last quite a few years, but color tends to fade at a shocking rate. With scanamurals, you can take a bitty photo, even 35mm, and produce an extra-large, colorfast mural. On canvas. It's a latter-day wonder.

The original invention came out of Japan. The story goes that one day a graphic designer, a Mr. Gisen, had to make a backdrop for a show, and it was going to have to be handpainted. He said to himself something like this: "This is a job for television. A television beams electrons. If I could just get it to beam-paint, I'd have my backdrop." Eureka! He did. Fuji Telecasting then developed the process in Japan, where it's been used mainly to make giant banners that hang from tall buildings advertising movies. In 1975, 3M acquired the license for the United States.

3M adapted the process for the American market and now has three Painting Computers in Canoga Park, California. Management's disinclination to

have the reporter personally survey the computer seemed to stem from the facts that the process itself is a secret—and a more mechanical mind than this reporter's might divine how it works—and the work-in-progress is likely to become some corporate ad campaign not yet public. And clearing the press for visiting reporters is not done lightly. We're talking expensive computer time here. The reporter took it well, for she is a reasonable person, with secrets of her own.

This is, however, what the reporter would have seen: An operator wraps a machine-ready transparency, made from the original picture, around an optical tube. A beam reads the picture and splits it into four colors: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. The color and density are converted into electrical signals, and four sprayheads pointed at a large drum are activated. Material to paint onto (the substrate) has been wrapped around the drum. This material can be of many different, flexible types, although canvas is the most popular, and it can be up to 15 feet wide and 10 feet long. The optical tube and the drum roll simultaneously, reading and painting. The Painting Computer can paint a picture in about an hour. The cost is essentially payment for computer time.

And the cost is high. I may wish to blow up a picture of my wedding cake to the size of the dining-room wall, but the bill would run about \$2,500. Therefore, I will not. But then again I may, because scanamurals can do things nothing else can. Unlike photographic enlarging, scanamurals get better as they get bigger. With every revolution of the drum, the sprayhead advances two millimeters ($\frac{1}{16}$ inch). So, proportionally speaking, the more you enlarge, the finer the distinctions. However, fine resolution is not in itself a characteristic of scanamurals. They work best with large pictures, to be seen from a certain distance.

The image can be printed on canvas, polyesters, vinyls, carpeting, and some papers. Vinyl is used in hospitals and food service areas because it can be cleaned easily. There's an antigrffiti coating



DeSana's kinky scanamural: Unlike a photographic enlargement, it got better as it got bigger.