

## Pictures of Elegance

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ART OF JIMMY DE SANA

*Roberta Smith*

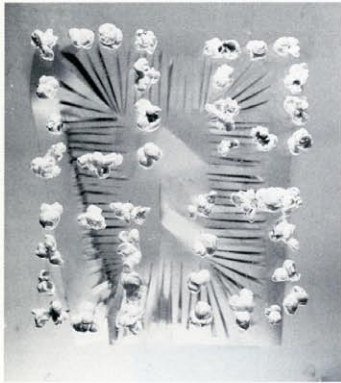
Jimmy DeSana is the genuine article, an artist with style and an understanding of history as well as an indelible personal vision. In addition, DeSana is both a Southerner and a gentleman, and aspects of these two identities—something relaxed and gracious and discreet—infuse the best of his images, whether they are his pseudopornographic images of the early 1980s or his more emblematic motifs of recent years.

Throughout his career, DeSana's primary subject has been the human body, often presented in unlikely and titillating predicaments, or hybridized with sundry everyday materials and objects. His images explore without exploiting and reveal without reviling the vulnerabilities of the human condition. Their distinguishing visual characteristics are a startling beauty and a homemade, handmade directness. Their prevailing emotional tone is an endearing, resonant sweetness, a sense of almost unfathomable meaning in the guise of transparent simplicity.

The tradition that feeds DeSana's art is Surrealism, the Surrealism of both Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup and Man Ray's glowing photograms. As with Oppenheim, the beauty of DeSana's photographs often starts with unexpected juxtapositions that trigger a genuine double take. At first they are eerie and inexplicable, the tinted glow of light, a strange texture, a limb or torso suddenly coming into focus. But gradually things clarify and explain themselves, and the viewer is let in on the secret of each image's genesis. As with Man Ray's photograms, DeSana's beauty leads to an understanding of photography's infinite, sometimes miraculous malleability and its inevitable ability to simultaneously lie and tell the truth.



Jimmy



*Popcorn*  
1985

In *Soapsuds*, one of the images from DeSana's 1980 New York exhibition, a nude figure swoops into the picture on the diagonal, feet in the upper-left-hand corner of the image, head in the lower right. We soon come to see that the head of this inverted Adonis is partly submerged in a toilet bowl, and this bowl, a gentle fountain, is frothing piles of beautiful, soft white soapsuds that eradicate all notions of the scatological. Almost as an afterthought we spot a pair of All-American sneakered feet on the toilet tank: a person facing the other way, whose inattention further defuses the tension of the image.

DeSana is also a member of a generation of artist-photographers known for making rather than simply taking pictures. Along with artists like Laurie Simmons, Cindy Sherman, James Welling and James Casebere, he took Man Ray's idea of creating the photographic image from scratch and liberated it from the darkroom, applying it in the studio (and beyond), giving new dimension to the genre of the set-up, or tableaux, photography.

In early eighties images like *Soapsuds*, suburbia was DeSana's darkroom. Working against its backdrop and with its most innocuous materials, he insinuated scenarios of decadence into the domestic front while gently emptying them of perversion. During this period, there's a hands-on, almost sculptural quality to the way DeSana uses materials and arranges his models.

His sculptural skill is particularly apparent in *Plastic Bag*, in which the four-legged shape of two people wrapped in plastic dry cleaner's bags is flanked by the four-legged shape of a small poodle in the



*Gooseberries*  
1987

foreground and the legless, more substantial, but also irregular, shape of a large jagged boulder in the background. The brackets of “animal” and “mineral” are quite clear in this red-tinted scene, but the central character—the Teen from Another Planet—tugs at us with its embryonic vulnerability.

In the second half of the eighties, DeSana started returning to the darkroom to concoct images, as did Man Ray, from scratch. His hybrid forms persist. The two-legged dancing fruits of *Pear* reprise the bagged pair of *Plastic Bag*, but now his figures float in space, like some kind of glyphs or ornaments, or something minute and unpredictable that has just escaped from a medieval manuscript or a painting by Bosch.

In other images, DeSana concentrates exclusively in the everyday materials that in his earlier work might have been used as props. The white blossoms of *Popcorn* are just that, pieces of popcorn sustained by a grasslike armature of cut paper and bathed in a yellow light. Here, as in many other images from the past few years, DeSana pushes his style to new extremes of both simplicity and mystery.

In a time when photography has been the beneficiary of much theoretical exegesis, Jimmy DeSana has always done exactly as he pleased, exploring the limits of his medium and his subject. Ultimately, it is the intuitive quality of his work that draws us to it. In DeSana's art elegance and honesty are merely two sides of the single coin of life.

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