

ARTFORUM

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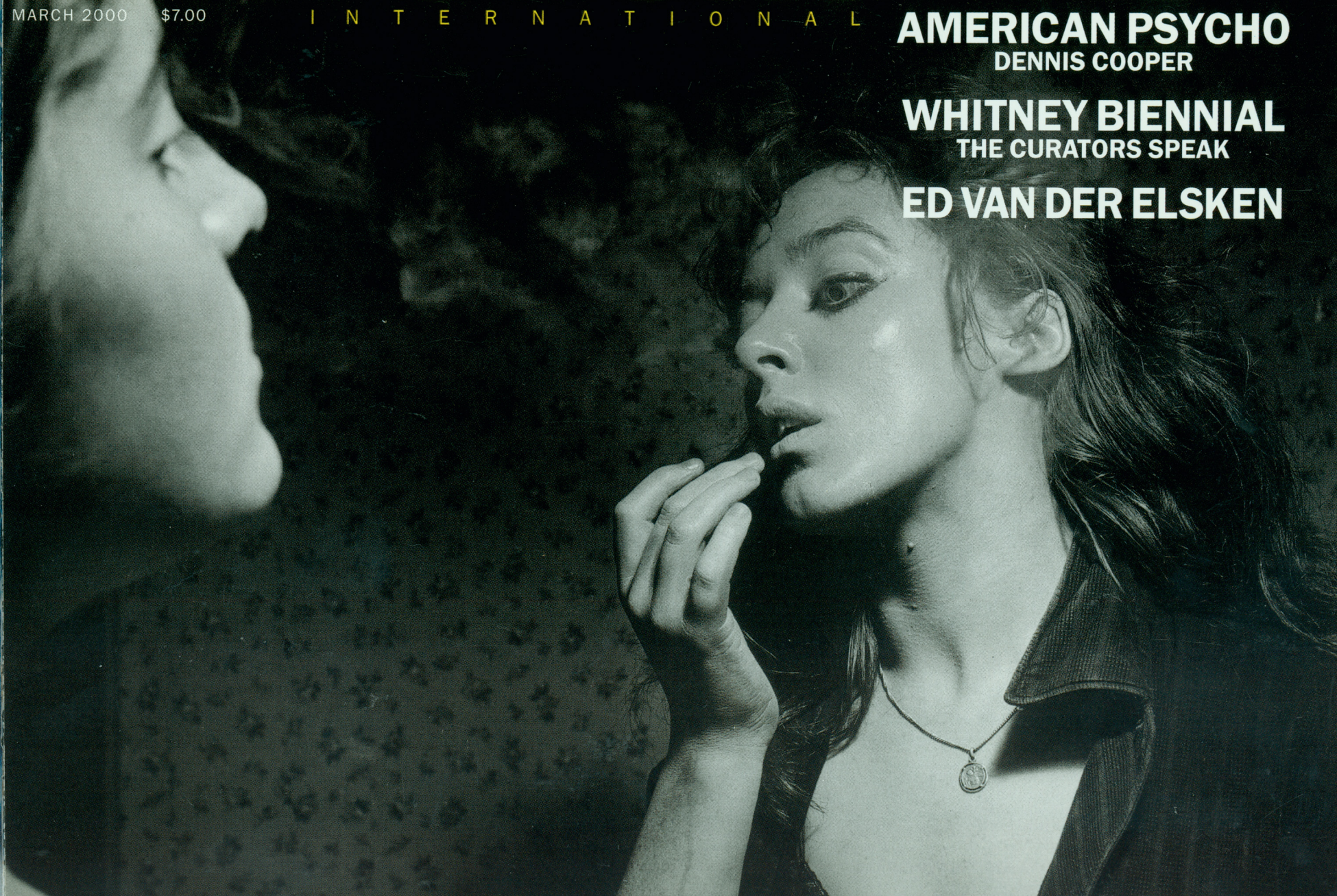
I N T E R N A T I O N A L



AMERICAN PSYCHO
DENNIS COOPER

WHITNEY BIENNIAL
THE CURATORS SPEAK

ED VAN DER ELSKEN





L.C. Armstrong, *Eighty-Sixed*, 1999,
acrylic, bomb fuse, and resin on linen, 42 x 36".



Paul Graham, untitled, 1999, color photograph,
ca. 70 x 50". From "End of an Age."

L.C. ARMSTRONG POSTMASTERS

L.C. Armstrong has recently turned from conceptually based abstraction to large, aggressively breathtaking floral panoramas, most of which bear signs, subtle and otherwise, of eco-trouble in paradise. Her signature, in addition to the shield of resin in which she encases her canvases, is the thorny index left by a spent bomb fuse. Here it is reborn as barbed mossy stems bearing up the many flowers, botanically exact and imaginary, spilling giddily across the picture plane. Although the fuse traces lose their purely gestural aspect, as well as a certain isolate nastiness they had in the abstractions, they are also less gimmicky now: That is, the ominous connotation of impending violence is wittily recontextualized to underscore the explosive nature of Armstrong's *fleurs du mal*: blooms as bombs. It is an inspired move, this stemming of the fuse, and the trope is the richer for it.

In the large, four-panel *Scenic Overlook* (all works 1999), marigolds, daisies, tiger lilies, birds-of-paradise, and orchids burst in a dynamically choreographed fashion across the foreground of a landscape whose multiple vanishing points are dominated by a Niagara Falls-like cataract being gazed at, in the lower right corner, by a minuscule pair of Northern Romantic nature lovers. Once a van and race-car customizer, Armstrong draws on the flashy tricks of that trade (airbrush, resin, kitsch illusionism), as well as on a number of art-historical sources, primarily Northern Romanticism and Hudson River School. Here as elsewhere, the flowers are virtu-

osically rendered, and the landscape as a whole is majestic. But after a bit, it becomes clear that something is wrong: The light has a sickly, pre-tornado cast, and things from distinct climatic zones—icebergs, a cactus, swans, a dormant willow—have drifted together. Several of the flowers bear mutations, such as pink spherical membranes over their stamens.

Yet if this is eco-art, concerned with global warming and the impact of radiation and genetic engineering on speciation, it stands in stark contrast to the moralizing of a Walton Ford. Armstrong has a sense of humor, at times quiet, as in *Moon Under Morning Glory* and *Amaryllis Over Moonrise*, in which mutant and "natural" flowers coexist, and at times goofy, as in the Masaccio Adam and Eve being expelled from a Ruscha-like bar in *Eighty-Sixed*.

Haunting a show like this is the question of whether the sparkle and facile perfection of the illusionism, as well as the cuter jokes, will wear thin. I'm inclined to give Armstrong the benefit of the doubt. These are without exception extraordinarily well-composed pictures endowed with a certain negative capability. *Hibiscus Over Twin Towers* is the mysterious best: flower in foreground, twin towers sunstruck in the powdery distance. Swept clean of portents and mutations, it seems to be saying something of genuine import about nature and antinature: that is, not much, except that there they are, in the tweaky crystalline light of Claritin advertisements, and it's hard to tell them apart.

—Thad Ziolkowski

PAUL GRAHAM SCALO

Paul Graham's latest series, "End of an Age," 1999, consists of forty-nine large color photographs of twenty-somethings hanging out in clubs somewhere in Western Europe or the US (Edinburgh? Munich? Helsinki? New York? Graham refuses to specify). Most of these images are portraits that catch the singular subject unaware and unposed, usually in profile, often leaning against a wall. No one looks directly into the lens. One turns three quarters away, like Betty in Gerhard Richter's eponymous 1988 painting, into a sea of red and gold. Harsh, stark, sharply defined flash pictures alternate with moodier available-light images that contain more saturated color. These are silent images made in a loud place, still images in a fast place.

Graham eschews the most basic convention of portraiture—the direct gaze of the subject—along with most rules of professional photography. Some images are out of focus; others are almost entirely obscured by color cast. What makes them each compelling is their aggregate conceptual force. Nearly every one of these kids wears the same expression: an open, somewhat stoned, searching look. Although they are bona fide portraits, intended to "draw forth" something from each subject, this *something* is collective rather than individual. Unlike Graham's previous series in Northern Ireland ("Troubled Land," 1984–87, consisting of landscapes into which subtle signs of political conflict intrude) and Japan ("Empty Heaven," 1989–95, com-