

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY
GUARDIAN

Oct. 19 - Oct. 25, 2005 • Vol. 40, No. 03

'This Delicate Monster'

Through Oct. 29, Rx Gallery

FOLLY AND ERROR and *This Delicate Monster*, the two videos featured in Michelle Handelman's current installation at Rx Gallery, take their names from the Charles Baudelaire poem "Au Lecteur" (To the Reader). The piece is an introduction to his book of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil) and acts as both a caveat emptor and an admonishment to his readers. Baudelaire was sensitive to his readers, critics, and the press and even wrote three draft prefaces to the collection, all of which poke fun at the stupidity of supposed learned men. He insists on his similarity to them and on his readers' propensity for "folly and error, avarice and vice," ending "Au Lecteur" with "Hypocrite reader! – You! – My twin! – My brother!" These days nobody would bat an eye at the excesses of Baudelaire – a syphilitic drunkard and opium addict – but in 1857 his life and his work were quite scandalous. Media artist Handelman, a former San Francisco resident now based in New York, deftly uses text excerpts from *Les Fleurs du Mal* ("Condemned to an eternal laugh because I know not how to smile," "No abyss compares with your bed," "In the permanent green darkness of a forest of firs / Where under a stricken sky a muffled sigh fills / The air ...") as the conceptual and visual basis of her videos, presenting a lush and erotically charged atmosphere in which to reconsider Baudelaire's meditations on sex and death. The videos' all-female cast is costumed by Italian couture-fetish fashion designer Garo Sparo, and Italian noise band Larsen provides a soundtrack that oscillates between heavy panting, nocturnal house noises, and disruptive, ripping guitar riffs. The overall effect is tense and anticipatory, a preview to avarice and vice without the resolution. Handelman pushes things further by enacting Baudelaire's antagonistic relationship with his readers in the live performances. Performers are installed on chairs overhead, hissing, whistling, and heckling the audience. It stands to reason that Handelman knows her audience well too, and that her work is created for those with a "passionate taste for the difficult." I hope to see you there. *Next performance: Oct. 27; gallery hours: Wed.-Thurs., 3-9 p.m.; Sat., 5-9 p.m., and by appt, 132 Eddy, SF. (415) 756-8890, www.rxgallery.com.* (Katie Kurtz)

E-mail Katie Kurtz at katiejkurtz@gmail.com.