

**NELSON SANTOS: SOLO**  
at *Bodybuilder and Sportsman*,  
through April 8

**CAROLINE RUST**  
at *Artemisia*, through April 1

By Fred Camper

## STRANGE BREW

Working in a tradition at least as old as some of the surrealists—and arguably extending it—some young artists make disunity or a lack of resolution central. Among them are a group that, perhaps reflecting our culture's sensory overload, create overstuffed works almost bursting at the seams with bright colors and unusual materials: fur and glitter and artificial turf. In turn that overload often creates contradictions or juxtapositions that suggest simply too many meanings. Rather than carefully balancing ambiguities in the classical modernist manner, these radical works offer such diverse, apparently irreconcilable thoughts that they threaten to bust the viewer's brain circuits.

Nelson Santos's exhibit at *Bodybuilder and Sportsman*—18 works in all—is a prime case. The videotape *Affirm* juxtaposes four elements, each of which would be a bit absurd even on its own. We see excerpts from autofellatio porn videos, footage of Santos's dog catching and swallowing soap bubbles, and Santos's midsection clad only in furry briefs; when he massages the center, two miniature mirrored disco balls attached to the bottom rotate (there's a hidden motor). The fourth and most ridiculous element is the sound track, taken from a

of the feral position to accomplish their mission. Meanwhile the idiotic narrator, accompanied by airy music, drones on about being "a clear, open channel for love."

Santos is doing two very different things at once: he's actually saying something and also destroying the possibility of meaning. The tape suggests a link between auto-fellatio, cutting-edge underwear, the repetitive bubble snatching of a pet, and New Age mantras—and they do all seem to be different forms of self-absorption. Indeed, there are moments when the self-help narrator's monologue coincides so perfectly with the bent-over self-lovers that one can imagine, if only for an instant, an argument for the transcendence of self-sucking. Then the absurdity of it all reasserts itself, and again one sees the images as loaded with contradictory meanings and associations (dog doing what it likes, for example, dog as trained pet, dog as ball licker).

As if the video were not enough to cause the mind to shut down, Santos has also placed *Big Beautiful Balls* on the floor below the wall-mounted TV. Continuing the ball motif found in most of the objects here, these are spheres covered in multicolored silk flowers. Pretty and domestic, they suggest an excess of sensuality—and they're displayed as if they were the TV's testicles. Hanging nearby is *Wild War*, a two-piece outfit made up of a fur cap and the disco-ball briefs.

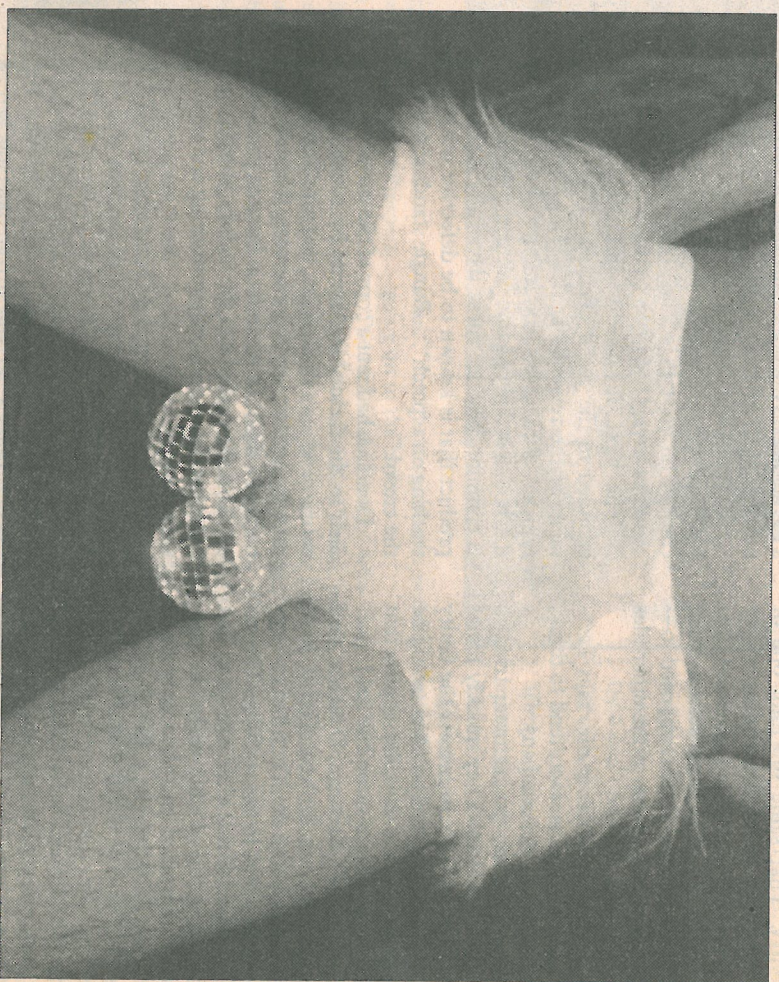
Born in San Leandro, California, in 1969, Santos came to Chicago in 1995 to study at the School of the Art Institute, where he got an MFA. Raised as a Catholic, he made photographic installations earlier in his career arguing for a homoerotic subtext in Renaissance and baroque Christian painting—"all these images of half-

stuffed dog lies on its back on artificial turf, spinning disco balls attached; a few bright fake flowers complete the scene. It seems there's a story, but it's just about impossible to imagine one that would make sense.

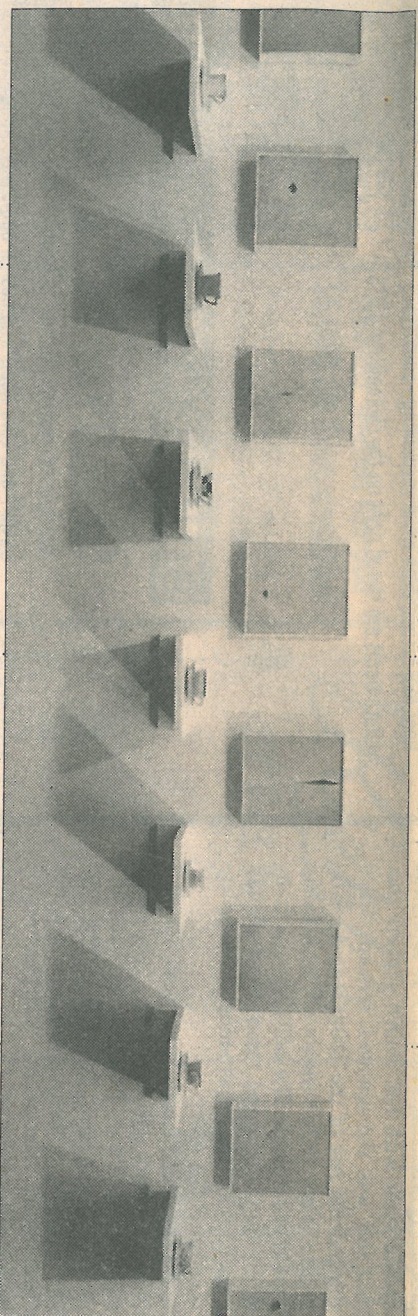
*Buddies* is the title of four photographs, two of Santos in his "wild

Internet—collides with the title: these "tricks" appear to have no need of another person. But the tracings themselves, done in glitter glue, take these contorted figures out of the realm of the everyday—though flat, the images sparkle, their reflected light pulling them off the page.

lifestyle—he identifies himself as a "queer man"—"objectively disordered," yet he managed to find himself in images from that same church. Perhaps what's unreasonable is not paradox or contradiction but traditional artists' appeals to rationality and order.



"AFFIRM" BY NELSON SANTOS



"MEMORIES OF IVANHOE" BY CAROLINE RUST

self-help audiocassette called *Magnetizing Your True Love*.

The result is a fascinating, unsolvable pastiche. As we watch guys sucking themselves, we hear "Your own love will merge with the love of the entire universe." The bubble-guzzling dog (Santos says he uses edible soap) and Santos's fur-clad crotch have some of the same self-absorbed quality as the auto-fellators, who typically bend into some version

naked men," Santos says, "painted by men on the request of men to be put into the houses of men." Hearing Barbara DeGenevieve—his instructor at San Jose State (before she came to the School of the Art Institute)—say that the personal is political helped Santos realize "how personal I could be." But what's interesting about this show is the way he goes beyond a single narrative. Like *Affirm*, the installation *Spin* eludes interpretation. A

wear" and two of his dog. His interest in messing with gender is evident from the somewhat disconcerting mix he creates of his hairy legs and the feminizing fur of the briefs. But he also mounts all the photographs in fur frames, oversensualizing these already sensual, tactile works and again creating an interpretation-defying overload. Similarly, Santos's subject in *Tricks*—eight tracings on acetate of auto-fellators taken from the

At one time an artwork full of confusing, contradictory meanings was taken to be a poorly constructed at-tempt at ambiguity. But for Santos, as for other young artists, ambiguity is less an aim than high-spirited discom-bobulation. As our culture grows more diverse, learning to live with contradictions becomes almost a survival tool. Santos himself was raised by parents who were immigrants from the Azores in a religion that calls his

Caroline Rust's eight installations at *Artemisia*, paintings combined with three-dimensional objects, have an effect similar to that of Santos's work. Certainly they make much less sense than her reasonable-sounding notes suggest. She tells us that the seven demitasses in *Memories of Ivanhoe* remind her of the cups her grandmother used, that they represent "warmth and security" to her as well as "femininity," and that the eight paintings hung above them "also symbolize femininity." But this piece is far more suggestive than that—in fact, it sets the mind racing.

Mounted on shelves, the seven cups are innocent enough in themselves, though their colors and patterns are diverse. Above them are eight paintings of flat, creamy tan surfaces, all but one of which seem to have a tiny opening or slit. Through these openings a hot, reddish fleshy glow is visible: it seems we're peering through a narrow opening into the red insides of a body cavity. One surface even has



a suggestion of buttons just below the slit, as if we were looking at a slightly opened blouse.

"Femininity" is present here not only in the teacups, traditionally associated with women, but in the intense if somewhat oblique suggestion of intimate body parts. By making the paintings literally dominant in the installation, Rust focuses on the bright red insides. Yet the details within the slits are never explicitly sexual, suggesting there's more at work here than a view of "pink," to use porno parlance.

When Rust—born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1971 and living in South Carolina today—told me something about her life, another reading emerged. During her second year of college she became unaccountably ill—she had fever, vomiting, and intense pain—and was in intensive care for about two weeks. She underwent tests, blood transfusions, surgery; a catheter was implanted in her heart. She was stabilized then, but it wasn't until a year later that she was correctly diagnosed—with Wilson's disease, an extremely rare but readily controllable ailment in which the body cannot process copper.

The body's vulnerability is also apparent in *Wounds That Never Bleed*, three paintings mounted above two shelves with an old pair of gloves on each. The paintings are mostly filled with intense red blotches, the variations in color suggesting various thicknesses of blood—apparently some wounds *do* bleed. But what's most interesting is the way suggestive images and objects send the mind in contradictory directions: among other things we remember that gloves protect against wounds but are also worn by surgeons. Further overheating the mix are Rust's references to Princess Diana in the note for this work (and for others).

Writing about *The Hand That Supports*, another piece employing gloves, Rust recalls her father brushing her hair as she lay semiconscious in the hospital. That association is embodied in hairbrushes held in two gloves, each mounted on a shelf. By contrast the three paintings above show a soft fabric saturated in a disturbingly thick deep red. Recalling at once the hot sensuality of Rust's slits in *Memories of Iwanhoe* and blood-soaked sheets, these paintings combined with the gloves provoke incongruous associations not readily resolved. ■