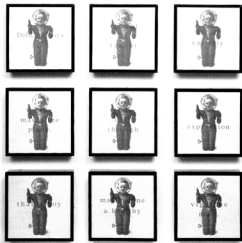


Kimberly Austin at Braunstein/Quay Gallery

Kimberly Austin's latest body of work, *How to Live*, recently on view at the Braunstein/Quay Gallery, continues her exploration of psychosocial development and the cultural forces which shape it. Austin, as in her previous body of work *Learning Normalcy*, brings together images and text drawn from a range of health and lifestyle guides written in the first half of the century to create a series of pieces which reflect upon the social mores out of which our present culture grew. They

14 Artweek



Kimberly Austin, *Space Boy*, 2000, gum bichromate print, w.c. paper, maple panel with steel frame, 12" x 12" x 3" panels, at Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco.

Kimberly Austin—*How to Live*
closed December 2 at
Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San
Francisco.

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offer chilling comment on the repressive effects of social control which seeks to limit our individuality rather than foster it.

Though in many ways we live in a very different world than that of fifty years ago, the texts which lie at the heart of Austin's pieces are the mantras we were raised on. *Rocking Chair* (2000) is a grid of nine images of an uninviting rocking chair, superimposed with the text, "Perfect children are the greatest prize on earth. Childbearing should be a woman's chiefest study. A well-adjusted child is without a doubt a woman's crowning joy." It is a sentiment I had impressed upon me repeatedly by my mother—married in 1950, a woman who introduced herself with my father's name and defined herself by the accomplishments of her family. The text of *Rocking Chair* mimics, almost to the word, things she said to me in adolescence about what I should want to be, and though I grew up in a world that taught me otherwise and nurtured my ambitions, I remember well the strength of her beliefs.

Austin has been revisiting the belief systems of an earlier generation, examining their simple dictums for living as a means of disabusing them of their power. The text accompanies emblematic images of childhood—dolls, toy planes, a rocking chair, a pair of tiny shoes—all meant to engage some notion of a mythic innocent youth. They take us to the fringes of memory where what is real becomes entangled with murky imaginings. Austin works in gum bichromate, an antiquated nineteenth century photographic process which gives the pieces a slightly faded, weathered look, like old photographs carelessly stored. The process encourages a nostalgic reflection to which our emotions warm; her images have a sentimental sweetness that is inviting at first glance. But as we read the text, sometimes slightly obscured within the image and sometimes on text panels interspersed between images, a different feeling is evoked. It's one of a dawning, suffo-

ating regularity reinforced by the repetitiveness of imagery and its cold, sterile presentation in slick steel frames. In *Space Boy* (2000), a piece featuring repeated images of the same tin astronaut toy, the text ("Delicate boys should be taught to act entirely on the masculine plane. It is only through virile expression that a boy may become a healthy vigorous man") laid delicately across the surface of the images turns the piece dark and cutting. There is a meanness in this directive that denies the possibility of difference, tolerance or understanding. Implicit in it, is the will to conformity, a definite and inescapable

pressure to fit the narrow confines of culture's rules, roles and regulations. These polite statements on living that Austin has culled from so many manuals of manners carve out a social space that only a few of us can comfortably live in.

This is obviously what Austin wants us to understand, and she provides a potent contemplation of the totalitarian nature of "normalcy" in *How to Live*. If there is a weakness in her work, it is that we too easily recognize the values and beliefs examined as outside of ourselves and our present generation. There is the impulse to guffaw in disbelief as we read, "Avoid late hours, tight garments, undue excitement and evil associates..." It is a list of amusingly antique concerns. We are far less willing to believe in the social mores of our parents and take responsibility for them feeling, as a matter of course, that much has changed as we balance on the cusp of a new century. But is this really true? How does the morality of the generation that raised us, play itself out in our present social landscape? What does "normalcy" require of us now? These questions beg a more complex engagement with the materials of Austin's work, and though her austere approach makes a powerful polemic, a more nuanced critique may have been generated by a dialog between the generations.

—Alicia Miller