

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Prom Night

Oh prom night--the hyped-up pinnacle of the typical American teenager's life. It is a chance to look your hottest in front of your peers, take a ride in a limousine, bust a move on the dance floor, spend some quality time with that crush you've been eying all Freshman year, and get *that* much closer to losing your virginity before college (naturally, for these reasons, teen movies incorporate the prom night as a central theme). And don't forget those godawful photographs with the corinthian column and fake fireworks background that seemed so awesome when you were eighteen and now you can't bear to look at them without wondering, "what was I thinking?" ...or at least that is what I wonder.



Bayete Ross Smith, *American Wild Style*, *Four Color Burner*
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In all seriousness however, prom is not all taffeta, awkwardness, and buffet dinners...it is essentially a rite of passage in American society--it is a celebration of a young man or woman's inauguration into adulthood. While some may argue that prom and its relative, the debutante ball, has become a commodity in the age of MTV's *Super Sweet Sixteen*, and therefore more of a homogenized affair, It remains an opportunity for young men and women to define themselves and present their newfound identities to the greater community. The fact that most teenagers, regardless of differences in ethnic and socioeconomic divisions, typically participate in prom activities, speaks to the community-specific and personalized aspects of the prom.



Bayete Ross Smith, *Wether Playin ball or coolin' in the hall or just writin' my name in grafitti o n the wall*

[Bayete Ross Smith](#) explores these themes as well as the history of portrait photography in his series, *Pomp and Circumstance: First Time to be Adults*, on view at [Patricia Sweetow Gallery](#) (77 Geary St.) through October 11th. Appropriating the contemporary prom photo format, Bayete invited his subjects from highschools in the bay area (Berkeley, Oakland, Piedmont, San Francisco) to pose in impromptu photographs. Bayete's images are unique

because of the large format of the image and the incredible--almost clinical--detail he is able to achieve with his camera, which is a far cry from the flattering soft-focus of many commercial prom images. The result is intriguing because of its seemingly contradictory combination of endearing nostalgia and critical distance suggested by the large and highly detailed print--in addition, outrageous and sometimes flamboyant prom fashions and poses add some humor into the mix. The high detail also reveals imperfections--pimples, make up, stray hairs and sometimes awkwardly fitting clothing are made visible and testify to the fact that these images are of adolescents in transition. Furthermore the posturing in imitation of popular images in magazines and on TV and in movies speak to the way in which the photographic/filmic image interacts with society.



Bayete Ross Smith, *Hard Candy Princesses*

Bayete's solo show brings a fresh perspective to contemporary youth culture a through an investigation of social rites and photography. Bayete's series, *Passing*, which appropriates the passport photo in a dialogue about identity, borders, and ethnic politics, is also currently on view at the [MOAD](#).