

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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SFBG
SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN

September 10, 2008

Seeing differently

"Jonathan Burstein: Visage" and "Ross Smith: Pomp and Circumstance"

By Johnny Ray Huston



Jonathan Burstein

*Museum Guard #5
(Winnie)*

collaged museum
publications and acrylic
on Arches.

REVIEW Lore has it that the collage grandmaster Jess rejected Artforum as source material for his imagery. Last week I happened upon a stack from the mid-1980s, and thumbing through the dated pages, I could understand Jess' stance. Still, the young Bay Area artist Jonathan Burstein proves that today's slablike glossy Artforum can be a vibrant source, especially when its pages are put through a color-coding process and turned into images that obliquely tweak notions of self in and outside the art world. Some works within "Visage," Burstein's second solo exhibition at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, turn hundreds of page fragments from Artforum and Modern Painters into the faces of acquaintances. The pastel color schemes aren't far from Jess', but the direct candor — one step from Burstein's earlier self-portrait explorations — is attuned to the complexity of the everyday. The best and perhaps most barbed pieces in "Visage" hone this practice, transforming pages of catalogs from the de Young Museum into warm visions of the guards who protect the site's art.

Burstein's show is a fine match for "Pomp and Circumstance," in which Bayeté Ross Smith adds a twist to the traditional prom photo, allowing his subjects — from various Bay Area high schools — to stage their poses, expressing themselves before backdrops he created. The resulting images range from superfly to poignant to both at the same time. And like Burstein's portraits, they are too lively to be consigned to reductive interpretations. Prom photos can't help but be glimpses of potential, especially in a year with such immense political portent. But even when working with a more celebratory tone and vivid palette than those found in earlier series of works, Ross Smith triggers viewers to contemplate — and question — their own ways of seeing.