

McClister, Nell, *Sean Dack*, Artforum, March 2005

SEAN DACK

DANIEL REICH GALLERY

Snatching stills from anonymous weblogs and surveillance feeds, projecting them onto large sheets of photo paper, and developing the results using standard color photography techniques, Sean Dack creates lush, mysterious glimpses of a twenty-first-century collective unconscious. At once intimate and impersonal, prosaic and fantastic, blogs explode the dialectics of the photograph, presenting fleeting moments not as fixed in the past but as constantly “refreshed” and endlessly negated. The particular sources of the footage that Dack mines here are never revealed and are, indeed, irrelevant to his project, which posits the appropriation

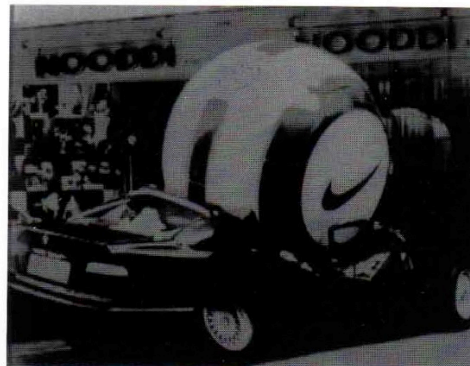
and manipulation of technologies and cultural artifacts as a hallmark of the contemporary creative impulse.

The images that were on view here are surprisingly cinematic given their banal provenance. The subtitle of *Man in Pool (Sexy Beast)*, 2004, an image of a bald wheeler-dealer up to his chest in water and talking on a cell phone, refers to the 2000 film starring Ben Kingsley. But Dack has made these mostly unremarkable compositions hellish: A quirk in the process of readying computer-screen shots for projection as photographic negatives renders the images as grainy patterns of molten red, fiery orange, and deep black. The apocalyptic palette suits some of the scenes (in the enigmatic *Parked Car*, 2004, a giant sphere with a prominent Nike logo crushes a luxury BMW sedan) and transforms others (idyllic scenes of tropical skies and a child at play become horribly ominous, as if the landscape were blood drenched or radioactive). In these tones, shot frontally, the Washington Monument looks like a giant tongue of lava poured from on high.

Dack’s project seems to incorporate a half-mocking commentary on the self-destructive tendencies of a society flirting with Armageddon, but depravity and vulgarity are something that the artist embraces as well as critiques. In a lone sculpture, *The Devil Made Me Do It*, 2003, a stereo plays a vinyl record of backward versions of songs deemed dangerous by crusading censors like Tipper Gore: the Beatles’ “Blue Jay Way,” Judas Priest’s “Better By You Better Than Me,” etc. In an age of MP3s and digital remixing, both the medium and its manipulation seem quaint. Daniel Reich’s press release notes that the evolution of the vinyl record enabled songs to be played backward for the first time, thus making supposedly hidden “back-masked” subliminal messages possible: John Lennon muttering “Paul is bloody” (which bolstered a rumor that Paul McCartney had died) and Rob Halford urging “Do it, do it” (which, in a historic court case, was blamed by parents for their sons’ suicides). The distinctive yowling and *thump-thump* sound of the songs unfolding in reverse (they were played through headphones in the gallery) nudged the photographs further toward the demonic and introduced an allusion to conservative politics.

In the era of almost total surveillance, Dack’s borrowed footage feels either unfairly stolen or perfectly public depending on whether one is behind or before the camera. The moments these blog images capture, unlike instants caught by the snap of a shutter, appear to be *anti*memorialized; they are not nostalgic glimpses into the past but free-floating particles of ahistorical cultural jetsam. While they feel importantly current, these digital stills reflect a pathetic and portentous lack of meaning, which the artist rightly associates with the apocalyptic. The back-masking is thus echoed in the images: As dated as the idea of listening to backward lyrics to find a hidden message may seem, it is not so different from surfing or posting weblogs in the effort to find or ascribe meaning that isn’t there. Dack’s is a provocative and multilayered rehabilitation project intended, at least in part, to fail.

—Nell McClister



Sean Dack, *Parked Car*, 2004, color photograph, 27 x 35".

