

# Beast in Show at David Adamson; William Newman, Still Goosing Boundaries

Dawson, Jessica . The Washington Post ; Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C.]23 Nov 2000: C05.

---

## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

A digital art pioneer, [William Newman] was touting the Apple computer as the new paintbrush back in the early 1980s, well before it was cool. Since then, computers have become integral to his method. For Newman, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis some 20 years ago, pushing keys and inputting coordinates has replaced the muscle control sapped by his disease. Digital technology has streamlined his production, too. Inkjet printers shot Newman's manipulated images straight onto canvases, eliminating the time-consuming sketches before painting begins.

Some of Newman's work fits the art world's current fascination with genetic engineering. "Bill/Sheep" is Dolly gone from cute to creepy. Her determined expression reads ominous. But unlike the art world's paranoid predictions of a ruthlessly bioengineered future-- the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art's current "Unnatural Science" show, or last month's "Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution" at New York's Exit Art--Newman remains polemic-free.

The artist affixed translucent versions of some of his images to the backs of eight Joseph Cornell-inspired boxes propped on a gallery ledge. Beyond their densely cracked tempered-glass surfaces, there's an assortment of beads, jacks and rubber balls wobbling around inside. We're meant to look through them and admire the layered imagery, but the blue-tinted Plexiglas drowns Newman's strong images.

## FULL TEXT

Faster than you can say "Botox," David Adamson's Seventh Street gallery closed up shop this month for a much-needed face-lift. In just two weeks, the space went from drab to gorgeous: new walls separate the exhibition area from the work space, and blond wood floors replace dull gray carpet. Finally, the gallery is equal to the high-caliber art it shows.

It's fitting, then, that work by Washington painter William Newman, himself enthused by transformations, should christen the renovated space. But his is not the stuff of traditional beauty: Nearly all the works in "Cracked 2000" are portraits of the artist merged with photographs of an animal or a relative. None, it's safe to say, is easy on the eye.

Newman has fashioned a 30-year career skirting the edges of propriety. As far back as 1975, the Corcoran professor, now 52, transformed downtown Washington into an outdoor peep show by painting a buxom nude named Sarah on a 25-foot construction billboard. In the interim, he's painted scenes of gore, confusion and bodies stretched almost beyond recognition. He departed briefly from these themes in his last solo show five years ago with a collection of abstracted flowers.

Fortunately, "Cracked 2000" marks Newman's return to mischief. He used his computer to meld the photographs of

animals and family with pictures of himself. The human-human combos look normal enough. But the human-animal combos are bizarre--like wicked cartoons sprung from the subconscious.

A digital art pioneer, Newman was touting the Apple computer as the new paintbrush back in the early 1980s, well before it was cool. Since then, computers have become integral to his method. For Newman, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis some 20 years ago, pushing keys and inputting coordinates has replaced the muscle control sapped by his disease. Digital technology has streamlined his production, too. Inkjet printers shot Newman's manipulated images straight onto canvases, eliminating the time-consuming sketches before painting begins.

Newman contends that the images he's produced for this show are the way he sees the world. "We move from one idea to the next and images fade into one another," the artist explains. "It's a relief," he says, when a canvas evolves to match the image swimming around in his mind.

Just how relieved anyone might be after seeing "Cracked 2000" is a tough call.

On one wall, 14 small paintings set in wide black frames explore the artist's connection to his human and animal family--like the children's book "Where Did I Come From?" on acid. Each is monochromatic with just a hint of color. The effect is a wall of yearbook photos. But although the melanges of Newman with his wife, his daughter and his mom make sense--he's looking at generational connectedness through physical bodies--they're not particularly interesting. The unique features of individuals meld into a generic boyish female.

Combinations of the artist and his pets--the current denizens of Chez Newman include a bulldog, parrot and fish--yield the most intriguing work. "Koi/Bill"--a fish with the clenched teeth and frightened eyes of a human--registers with horror-movie intensity. The angst-ridden face is instantly recognizable. The painting captures emotion and magnifies it to the size it feels like in our heads.

The 10 color paintings from the appropriately named "E-I-E-I-O" series--incorporating farm animals--make a fascinating museum of moods. Call it projection, but we see heightened versions of ourselves in these animals. The resulting images are wicked--a spaced-out ape with a cloud of dope smoke billowing from his mouth, or a devilish dog wagging its pink tongue. These are folks we know.

Newman's combination of conventional portrait techniques and wacky images is built for satire. In "Bill/Horse," a dimwitted steed painted in a raw butcher shop palette is cast against a deep black background that connotes an official portrait. The juxtaposition reminds one of an 18th-century political cartoon lampooning hated monarchs: Louis XIV as obtuse pony.

Not all are quite so funny. The acid pink swine in "Bill/Pig" is illuminated by a hyper-bright spotlight casting deep shadows in the room behind her. She stares plaintively at us. The picture, flecked with white brush strokes like refracted light inside a cheap lens, looks like a still from a monitor-mounted video-cam transmitting over the Internet. This little piggy looks trapped.

Some of Newman's work fits the art world's current fascination with genetic engineering. "Bill/Sheep" is Dolly gone from cute to creepy. Her determined expression reads ominous. But unlike the art world's paranoid predictions of a ruthlessly bioengineered future-- the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art's current "Unnatural Science" show, or last month's "Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution" at New York's Exit Art--Newman remains polemic-free.

The artist affixed translucent versions of some of his images to the backs of eight Joseph Cornell-inspired boxes propped on a gallery ledge. Beyond their densely cracked tempered-glass surfaces, there's an assortment of beads, jacks and rubber balls wobbling around inside. We're meant to look through them and admire the layered imagery, but the blue-tinted Plexiglas drowns Newman's strong images.

The same holds true for the couple of Iris prints on view here. Multiple images in blue and pink pastel look as if his rich oil palette has gone through the wash cycle. They're delicate and pretty, rinsed clean of their bite. Too bad. Newman is at his best when he's up to no good.

Cracked 2000 appears at David Adamson Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW, through Dec. 22.