

Pew Fellowship in the Arts 2002

Caden Manson

Watching Caden Manson's *Shelf Life* is a disorienting experience for an audience. A simultaneous "real-time" film accompanies the performance... as if the time on stage weren't real enough? Manson's doubling of the performance is a formal trick that sends the viewer careening off into surprising mental spaces. In order to make the film - which is simultaneously shown in sections on three contiguous screens - absurd interventions in the stage work must occur. Extra actors appear to serve as extended limbs, figures turn and move into strange positions for close-ups and so on. The seriousness of the film, with its mounting undertow of menace, is undermined by the completely visible comedy of its making. One has to continually refocus on the actors to keep them in the picture. In a strange way, this undercutting activity in Manson's work calls to mind the frequently obscured other meaning of "performance" - how *well* something works. In interdependent stage works where theater and cinema overlap, neither seems sufficient to communicate the strangeness of a scene. And perhaps neither is sufficient in itself, for Manson's subject matter is fundamentally concerned with the lives of the outcast. Slippery distinctions between gender, race, and sexuality find a formal analog in the overlapping and interpenetration of multimedia performance. Manson describes his work as being "of a raw personal nature verging on the hysterical." And in scenes where comedy is only thinly masking menace, one can see very clearly that even the word "hysterical" is subject to multiple interpretations. By exposing - and capitalizing on - the weaknesses of traditional stage performance, Manson has fashioned a unique means of efficiently engaging his audience. His performances may be neither fish nor fowl; not quite theater, not quite cinema, but they are resonant and disturbing glimpses across borders.