

NEW YORK REVIEW

James Cobb
CUE Art Foundation**D. Dominick Lombardi**

Since 1998, San Antonio-based painter James Cobb has been working exclusively in the digital world, producing large-scale Light Jet prints of the human body. For his series of works on view at the CUE Art Foundation, Cobb used a small, personal flatbed scanner to systematically capture sections of his models' bodies. After scanning, the bodies are reassembled on his computer. Then, using Photoshop, Cobb covers his subjects—mostly children—from head to toe in tattoos appropriated from every nook and cranny of popular culture.

In many instances, his subjects take on the eerie, ancient burial posture common to traditional Incan and Egyptian mummies. In *Phillipa* (2000), the subject lies prone with arms crossed over her chest. In *Ruby* (2000), Cobb's young subject assumes a fetal position—a posture one might also encounter in the hyper-preserved realm. In addition, the colors the artist chose to tone his subjects' skin are somewhat reminiscent of early cyanotype and sepia ink tone prints, giving the works that added feel of antiquity. To contrast the body-as-event aspect in his approach, the artist adds an unmodulated colored background—an element that helps contemporize the otherwise vintage appearance of the works.

Then there's that rather curious, uncomfortable look on many of the subjects'

faces. After reading the catalog essay, one can easily understand why Cobb built a platform surrounding his scanner, ostensibly to enable his subjects to get somewhat comfortable during the scanning process. The fact that this machine looks like some "back alley medical device", as the artist describes it, must make his young models especially suspicious. Add to this the way in which a scanner works, and you have some pretty potent facial expressions. There is also a general feeling that the subjects are floating in some sort of dense liquid. This is due to an odd gravity that prevails in these works since the images are captured from below. I suspect that there is a little bit of fear or anxiety that makes these kids hold their breath, adding weight to the illusion that they are floating in liquid.

The tattoo-oriented imagery Cobb employs is appropriated from just about every imaginable source and period of history. In *George* (2000), for instance, we see Casper the Friendly Ghost and a WWII pinup. In *Theora* (1999), a portrait of the artist's daughter, the subject's figure is donned with seminal images gleaned from store-bought tattoo magazines while the subject in *Clare* (2000) sports what looks to be an Aztec god on her upper back. *Jack* (2000) favors both Christian icons and photographs of dogs and motorcycles.

Cobb's graphic vocabulary is beholden to no religion, hemisphere, continent or people. Let's call it universal pop.

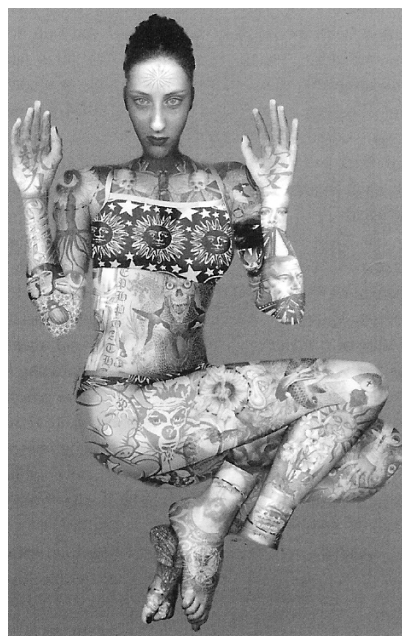
Then there are those subtle process indicators—those places where soft skin presses against the glass of the scanner distorting an ear, nose or expression. When the subjects' bodies are reassembled, they don't always match in perspective, size or location and, most importantly, in gravity. This quality affects their spiritual presence, making them appear a bit otherworldly. All this is quite apparent in *Valerie* (2000), where a flattened cheek, stomach, palms and a disarticulated lower leg distort the line of the body. Yet, this adds something of a spontaneous, obsessive, artist-gets-lost-in-his-work look that is refreshing and compelling. I was particularly drawn to *Rickie* (2000), the only horizontal piece in the show. It has all the components previously alluded to: the oddly crossed feet which bend against the scanner; the flattened, lifeless hand that yields as well. Yet, the Cleopatra-type pose of this decorated goddess synthesizes the timeless and the contemporary. She appears to have the world at her feet.

As with all the artists' subjects, *Rickie* too is covered over almost every inch of her skin in tattoos—the Campbell's Soup Kid flanked by a crazed cartoon cat, flowers, a serpent, frolicking cartoon dogs, that *Where's Waldo?* guy, Emmett Kelly's clown face, a devil riding an atomic bomb and so on. Most notably, the artist places the Hindu god Shiva dancing the *Nataraja*—the dance of destruction and recreation—on the subject's head. Placing this particular image on the subject's forehead also references Shiva's all-seeing third eye and hints that there may be much more than meets our own limited eyes in Cobb's work as well.

Artist and critic D. Dominick Lombardi writes regularly for ARTLIES, The New York Times, and Sculpture Magazine. He is currently involved in a major, ongoing curatorial project at The Roger Smith Hotel Gallery in NYC.



James Cobb, *Jack*, 2000
Light-jet print on paper, 56" x 25"



James Cobb, *Theora*, 1999
Light-jet print on paper, 47" x 32 1/2"