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## “Dead Man Walking”



Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.

--Norman Cousins

The million dollar question: Are we truly happy? This, of course, leads to another question: what makes us happy? Though it seems jadedness, apathy, and existential angst (à la Fight Club, Reality Bites, American Beauty) was a cultural phenomenon of the 90s, a sense of dissatisfaction and inconsequence has haunted cultural thought for centuries. However, such sentiments combined with today's burgeoning media, escalating youth violence, consumer-driven culture, and increasing availability of anti-depressants, makes for a very lethal combination—lethal, at least for the time being, the spirit. Contemporary work by artists Timothy Cummings, the HalfLifers, Sandow Birk, and Andy Diaz Hope and

Laurel Roth at the Catherine Clark Gallery in SOMA raises concern over the hordes of people who, unsatisfied with their lives and "feeling dead" inside, feel a compulsive need to escape and seek solace in quick-fixes such as alcohol consumption, anti-depressants, drugs, pornography.



Timothy Cummings' solo show of recent work, entitled Last Call, refers to the colloquial "last call" of drinks before the bar closes. For Cummings, the "last call" as it applies to life, refers to constant desire to drink or self-medicate and temporarily escape, instead of soberly engaging with one's problems. Though the subjects of Cummings' paintings appear youthful, their pallid skin, empty gazes, and unearthly eyes make them appear zombie-like, a darkly humorous and chilling reminder and warning of leading a

zombie-like existence in which one goes through the motions of living without an awareness of what is going on around him/her. The performance/video artists Anthony Discenza and Torsten C. Burns of HalfLifers pursue a similar theme as they film themselves as cinematic zombies attempting quotidian activities.



Selections from Sandow Birk's print series *Ten Leading Causes of Death in America* cast a darkly humorous eye upon contemporary American culture. While medical complications such as cancer and heart disease account for many deaths in America, Birk demonstrates that often times we are the greatest threat to our health and that we have nothing to fear but ourselves. In *Accidents* (2005), a young woman glances at the viewer (not watching the road), pen in hand, and cell phone clutched to her ear. Furthermore, a collection of CDs hangs over her dashboard and a Starbucks coffee sits in her cup holder—this woman is concerned about everything but driving. Last but not least, Andy Diaz Hope and Laurel Roth's chandelier sculpture *Blood, Money, and Tears* dramatically responds to our over medicated culture. Composed of garlands of gel caps, plastic tubing, and hypodermic needles, this chandelier has quite a presence in the gallery space. The piece has been installed such that viewers are able to walk under and around the chandelier—and it is quite frightening and awe-inspiring to stand under the piece and look up to see needles dangling precariously in space. Though morbid, and at times

depressing, I found this exhibit strangely inspiring. These artists want to compel people toward engagement and change—to wake up and live instead of going through the motions. While themes of death pervade this exhibit, I found that these artists were primarily concerned about finding the courage to live.