

Northern California

Timothy Cummings at Catharine Clark Gallery

Timothy Cummings's latest show of paintings of costumed, expectant children happened to fall in

October, but the bizarre feat is how appropriate they seemed on every other day of the month besides the 31st. Cummings's psychologically revealing works acknowledge that, in a sense, every day is Halloween, when children are expected to enact their own desires and their parents'—and perhaps those of a slightly creepy neighbor, too.

But though depictions of gussied-up kids like *Feathered* are certainly brooding and occasionally dark, they are never ugly; Cummings's images are unsettling not in spite of their appeal, but because of it. Rarely have children seemed quite so literally bright eyed and bushy tailed as in Cummings's evocative paintings, with their all-seeing moon eyes and outlandish furry costumes—though god knows many a doting parent has tried. Cute is a uniform into which children are squeezed by adults, sometimes ruthlessly, whether or not it fits—picture Jon Benet Ramsey poured into her tiny ball gowns and tiaras, or Ann Geddes's photogenic babies waking to find themselves stuffed into felt pea pods. Cummings takes this pageantry out of the context of Lil' Miss contests and glossy wall calendars and reframes it as a fetish, where the objects of our desire are our own childhoods. His paintings are as discomfiting as Sally Mann's nude portraits of her young daughter, only Cummings is more self-aware and self-indicting; the wide-eyed yet world-wise man-boys in these works bear more than a passing resemblance to the artist himself.

In this show, Cummings occasionally veers unnervingly close to Carol Keane territory, where hydrocephalic children in yellow rain slickers and red gumboots pout melodramatically beneath bubble umbrellas, with rain slashing down in perfect diagonals. Take for example *Echo*, a portrait of a big-eyed boy as sweet-faced and pliable as, say, Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, or a Richie Rich comic transferred onto Silly Putty. But there is something amiss in this picture of adorable wistfulness; one hand is cupped to the boy's protruding ear, and the hand seems too large and awkwardly positioned to be his own. What unseen force is urging the boy to listen, and why—is this a cautionary tale, a tableau of paranoid parenting, a symbolic scolding? The ambiguity here is anathema to the soft-focus technique, rescuing the work from maudlin excess. Just when kitsch seems worn out by thirty years of overuse, Cummings finds an edge that cuts deep.

Some works achieve this better than others. *Your Voice in My Head* is a gothic tale, where a jellyfish chandelier of an idea oozes a glittering tentacle into a

young boy's ear. His eyes are blue and staring, and his rosy cheeks are the only indication that he is being mesmerized rather than slain by the thought entering his head. The delicate indelicacy of this image makes it more successful than, say, *Glass Mask*, where a shimmering prison-

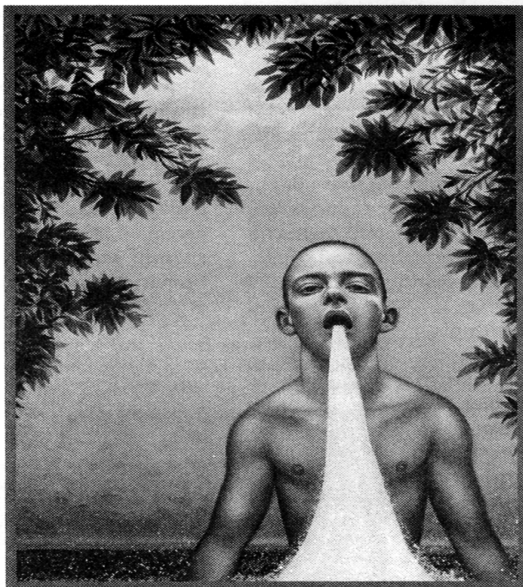
er's hood and suspenders over a young man's bare chest awkwardly evokes disco night at Abu Ghraib, or some untimely remake of the Communards's "Prisoner of Love." Ambiguity has its limits, and is easily squashed under the weight of loaded, apparently contradictory statements.

For a painter as accomplished as Cummings, taking a turn for the kitsch as an artistic strategy seems a perverse move; why would an artist who in past shows has proved himself well-versed in dadaism and Dutch painting resort to glitter and amusement-park color

schemes? The answer is tion, and in *Drool*, where of opalescent glitter spill adolescent boy's cherubic against a brilliant blue sk piece and this show as a Cummings does not seem resurrecting painterly flo theatrical nonsensicality, the profound sense of di that gives art its rawness vance.

Timothy Cummings: Que
December 3 at Catharine C
49 Geary St., San Francisco

Alison Bing is a contribu
Artweek.



Timothy Cummings, *Drool*, 2005, acrylic on panel, 16" x 12", at Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.