

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

January 19 through March 27

MATRIX presents an installation, a series of public billboards, and a special *Calendar* insert by New York-based artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres. The museum component of this exhibition will be on view in Gallery 1, and the billboards will be located throughout the East Bay.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's MATRIX installation consists of two greatly enlarged black-and-white photographs and two long strings of bare light bulbs hanging from the gallery ceiling. The photographs, taken by the artist, depict birds flying against banks of clouds that are suffused with the pale light of an obscured sun. Enlarged to such a degree, the photographs become grainy to the point of abstraction, coalescing as images only when viewed from some distance. The same photographs are installed on actual billboards at East Bay sites.

The materials and techniques of Gonzalez-Torres's installation are extremely modest: his use of commercially manufactured lighting fixtures and billboard prints neither astonishes nor intimidates the viewer with the virtuosity of the artist's "hand." Rather, Gonzalez-Torres's work is based in a conceptual tradition that is perhaps closer to the practice of poetry than to Western visual-arts traditions. Like a poet, Gonzalez-Torres does not reinvent language with each work, but rather utilizes the language (i.e. the materials) already available to him, recombining images and forms to create a specific effect.

It is in their juxtaposition and in the specificity of their placement—whether in a museum gallery or in an exterior public site—that Gonzalez-Torres's photographs become charged with intense emotion. In the current installation and billboard project, in particular, the artist unabashedly lays bare an expression of awesome solitude that may strike the observer alternately as sad and soothing. There is nothing obscure about this work: its appeal to the viewer is in terms of images and symbols that are rooted in the vernacular culture. Among the associations that spring to mind are sky/heaven, bird/individual, bird/angel, light/wisdom, lights/angels.

Gonzalez-Torres identifies with the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. Contrary to the common association of Romanticism with a self-absorbed, antisocial stance, Gonzalez-Torres's work resonates with that aspect of Romanticism that was imbued with social consciousness. As Raymond Williams describes it: "What were seen at the end of the nineteenth century as disparate interests, between which man must choose and in the act of choice declare himself either a poet or a sociologist, were, normally, at the beginning of the century, seen as interlocking interests: a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society, and an observation of natural beauty carried a necessary moral reference to the whole and unified life of man."

Indeed, the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is both rooted in contemporary social conditions and a comment on these conditions, albeit in an oblique and non-didactic manner. In this work, Gonzalez-Torres calls to mind the alienation that plagues our society as well as the profound sense of loss felt for those who have died prematurely from the ravages of disease, war, and crime. While the work is open to numerous readings, its mood of solemn meditation certainly reflects, for the artist, the tragedy of his lover's recent death from AIDS.

For a special centerfold insert in this *Calendar*, Gonzalez-Torres presents a photograph of ruffled pillows on an empty, unmade bed. This image, which has appeared previously on billboards around New York City, introduces a highly intimate and private scene into the rush and commerce of public life. Like many other works by Gonzalez-Torres, this piece has been produced in a virtually unlimited edition, allowing it to be disseminated to a broad and diverse audience.

In addition to his solo work as an artist, Gonzalez-Torres has been active for many years with the artists' collective Group Material (also including Julie Ault, Doug Ashford, and Karen Ranspacher). Like his own work, Group Material, through the creation of thematically based group exhibitions, creates bridges between aesthetic/personal/emotional and activist/public/informational modes. In 1989, Gonzalez-Torres participated at the UAM/PFA in Group Material's MATRIX exhibition AIDS Timeline.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres was born in Guaimaro, Cuba in 1957. He lives and works in New York City.

Lawrence Rinder

Curator

Billboards have been generously donated by Patrick Media Group Incorporated.

