

# Art in America

## Guy Richards Smit and Beth Campbell at Roebing Hall

by Calvin Reid  
published September, 2001



Beth Campbell, *View of Home (A Standardized Affection for Telepresence)*, 2000, 20 x 12 foot vinyl-sided house with two rooms: at Roebing Hall

In this split bill, Guy Richards Smit's recent video work offered an entertaining new take on his comically monstrous characters, while Beth Campbell's edgy installation was built upon a minefield of humorous social consequences taken from daily life. Smit moved on from his send-ups of the ego- and cocaine-driven 1980s art world to arrive at his new video, *The Ballad of Bad Orpheus*. This morbidly funny shore-leave parody is a rock opera with a musical score and lyrics so self-consciously bad, they're irresistibly good.

Smit turns the Greek myth of an obsessed lover on its head. *Bad Orpheus* is a "lover unable to love," a lady-killer of a sailor doomed to continually betray a steady succession of adoring women. He bemoans this failing in a series of dopey anti-love songs usually delivered to an admiring chorus of fellow sailors. "My arms are like an open grave," he sings in stagy regret. He punctuates these lamentations with outbursts of campy violence and absurd self-pity. "I'm sorry for sleeping around, waking up in beds all over town," he smirks in a combination of confession and warning. "I'm sorry for my deep jealous love, empty threats and the pointing of guns."

It's all deliciously funny, with cameos by Williamsburg art-scene notables (artist Laura Parnes shows up as a hooker; performance artist Michael Smith is the cuckolded Sailor Mike). *Bad Orpheus* finally gets his, stabbed to death by Sailor Mike for stealing his girl. Self-obsessed to the bitter end, the bloodied and dying Orpheus wails at Mike: "Why me, why not you?"

Campbell, whose intricate handwritten flowcharts of personal possibilities were a highlight of P.S. 1's "Greater New York" show, constructed an intriguing installation consisting of two bedrooms, identical to the smallest detail. In *House (A Standardized Affection for Telepresence)*, 2000, she invited us to enter a three-dimensional reflection. This mythic reality--the other side of the mirror--attempted to encapsulate the idiosyncrasies of

human personality, represented by an accumulation of consumer goods and personal effects littering both the living space and the consciousness of a “typical” young woman.

The duplicate bedrooms were strewn with the random articles of chickdom: underwear, sneakers, self-help books, notes and journals, assorted clothes and the inevitable poster of the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. Both rooms displayed a version of Campbell’s funny, existential flowcharts: handwritten schematics extending outward from a centerpoint labeled “Me.” The works include her free-form listing of attributes for daughter, woman, artist, student and dreamer.

Almost overlooked amid the choreographed disarray of two rooms (identical cigarette butts were spotted in each space’s ashtray) is a notepad with an inventory of tongue-in-cheek self-consciousness: “How I feel when I buy yeast infection medication,” “How I think you perceive me when I play pool in a smoky bar,” “How I feel when I forget the point I was about to make.” Campbell has produced a beguilingly witty, life-size puzzle that, like all good art, alludes to far more than the literal account of its parts.