

# Jesse Amado

RROSE AMARILLO

SAN ANTONIO

by John Ewing

On a warm night in July, a small crowd packed Rose Amarillo to witness something new by artist Jesse Amado. Known for his spare, elegant drawings and assemblages of uncommon grace, Amado's *Disenchantment* was eagerly anticipated as a watershed event in the artist's career. Ruminating on the distinct natures of love and desire, the multi-media experiment included video and performance, and the welcome presence of the artist himself. With cryptic reflections, *Disenchantment* was a short meander through a freeform overlap of fashion, art, cinema and popular music.

"I keep hearing about the *Zeitgeist*—how to express the style and rhythm of this moment we live in," says Amado. "It seemed like the moving image was the way to do it, more than anything else."

Without a doubt, *Disenchantment* moved much faster, in fact, than the eye could follow and with such a sweep of activity that viewers focusing in one direction missed what was happening in another. As an expression of current *Zeitgeist*, the simultaneity of these different phenomena seemed apropos. With both projection and monitors, there were moving images of wasps, a shopping mall, and an attractive man undressing. An edited video of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* played twenty minutes of subtitles. Elsewhere, Amado ceremoniously removed drawings from a gallery wall, while a raven-haired woman in a red bustier prowled the audience with a vintage Luger, making targets of unsuspecting men with peel-off stickers. Before anyone was ready, Amado stepped onto a small, metal cage and sang the Beatles' *Love Me Do*—a cappella—thus ending the piece.

Tying these elements together is akin to following a trail of crumbs. They spiral in concentric circles of cultural and personal reference, each layer coded to link past and present. This movement across time helps to shape *Disenchantment's* central dichotomy, Love and Desire. As a repository for memory and affection, love struggles with desire—that sexual, leading edge of consumerism and all things Pop. Therefore, Amado's piece is both nostalgic and au

*courant* as this month's *Vogue* magazine, *Disenchantment's* point-of-departure.

*Vogue* presents an incredible fantasy with beautiful, extraordinary women who are idealized and unapproachable," says Amado. "There's no way you can have them. As a heterosexual male, you become impotent, effete, because of those images." In the piece's opening video, the epigrammatic script rolling across the artist's chest is taken from a *Vogue* interview with the directors of P.S.1, the newly renovated contemporary art center in Long Island City, NY.

Subsequent video images depict consumption's more obsessive extremes. The undressed man and Amado are both shown balancing a shiny, red apple on their heads, an allusion to both William Tell and William S. Burroughs. Unrequited or devouring, desire is both object and action and linked, potentially, to danger.

This conflation of fashion, art, and desire seeded the original scheme for *Disenchantment*, but the emotional underpinnings are rooted deeper in Amado's personal history. Just out of high school, he joined the Navy in 1968. His enlistment took him to San Diego and later Newport, RI, where he spent leave weekends in New York City.

"That's where I got my education, roaming the streets of New York, going to galleries, museums, movie-houses, whatever I could afford. That's where I first saw *L'Avventura*," recalls Amado. Made in 1960, this stylish and provocative Italian film left a lasting impression on the nineteen-year-old artist-to-be. *L'Avventura's* poetic tale of desire and disillusionment involves a group of well-to-do, post-war Italians and the mysterious disappearance of a young woman. Expressing an existential view of modern relationships, the characters' emotional attachments are arbitrarily governed by circumstance and random chance. Whether or not desire leads to love seems beyond their control. The two central characters repeatedly voice this quandary. "I've never been so confused in my life," says Claudia to Sandro after the disappearance of their mutual friend. "The only way we can help each other is to be together," her new lover replies.

Transcribing memory into present-day experience, Amado revisited *L'Avventura* with a punch-style label maker. "Re-viewing" a portion of the film letter-by-letter, he separated the translated dialogue from the evocative imagery, and from this twelve-foot

tape created a series of graphite rubbings. In the middle of this laborious task, he discovered a nest of wasps obsessively focused on their own project outside his studio window. With video camera at hand, Amado recorded their efforts and, by coincidence, an uncanny soundtrack the frantic, pleading voices from *L'Avventura*.

By adding performance elements to this visual mix of drawings and video, Amado brought into even clearer relief the inherent tensions in his conception of love and desire. The beautiful woman with the pistol and targets personified the carefully controlled disclosure and limited access essential to the maintenance of desire.

"It was like opening up that *Vogue* magazine and seeing that woman again, and whatever power that image has for me," says Amado, describing the role of the performer and the manipulative power of fashion advertising. "Shopping with my Camcorder at my hip was a sort of quest for The Holy Grail, which is somewhere in Saks Fifth Avenue, I'm sure."

Amado's inclusion of *Love Me Do*, strikes the piece's final note. It's a coda to the dilemma of sustaining love in an era of desire. The sentimental ditty was one of the songs Amado and his buddies performed when they were swept up in Beatle-mania as teenagers. Such moments of self-exposure beg the question, "How public can the personal ever be?" How close do we get to the artist, his history, desires, emotional attachments and myriad abrasions? Amado gives access but is doggedly private at the same time. *Disenchantment* is a two-way mirror with occasional clear views to the other side. It's both a seduction and a plea.

"I wanted to give the audience something new, something risky, so they would not be afraid to take risks. I took down the drawings to remove the words, to clear a space where I could get up on that step and sing," says Amado. "I needed an ending. I needed to provide some kind of hope. Ultimately, I feel that love will overcome all of this." □

