

Plexiglas prankster plasters First Friday

BY JOHN EWING

If art objects had voices, Hills Snyder's creations would tell riddles and sing songs. Slick and cartoon-bright, the Helotes artist's Plexiglas cutouts speak in a language of shapely, colored forms, condensing his interest in popular culture into simple images with instant visual appeal. This First Friday at Three Walls Space, Snyder's "Tea for One" is the latest installment in a body of work loosely inspired by the artist's life-long infatuation with British rock 'n' roll. The collection of flat, sign-like objects includes a teapot and an umbrella, among other things, and seems to be snatched willy-nilly from the cultural ether. And if audiences consider these pieces to be flashy, disconnected one-liners, Snyder is neither surprised nor discouraged.

"I get to the images in different ways, but no one way is more valid than another," says Snyder. "It's like a train ride. I give people the option to get off at the first stop, and some do, but the train's still going." Snyder's slyly playful approach to making images lets viewers slide deeply into pop-culture history, art theory, and higher mathematics, or paddle blithely on the pleasurable, shiny surface of his art. Smiley faces have been a constant in his work since 1996, and here they reappear superimposed over line drawings of a cross in a work entitled *Stairway to Heaven*. The combination isn't a heavy-duty critique of Christianity, but rather a free-play juxtaposition of symbols that over time have acquired resonance beyond their specific origins. Arranged in groups of three, the images get progressively smaller following the ancient formula of Zeno's paradox. Describing a finite passage

with infinite steps, *Stairway to Heaven* is a mathematical abstraction creatively situated within the Led Zeppelin rock classic bearing the same name.

Few works by Snyder are this schematic; most are curiously oblique and resistant to fixed interpretations. *Oblique*, in fact, is the title of a piece from a Houston show. It's a rendering of a black boot the artist paid an Amsterdam prostitute 150 guilders to sketch. The image is presented in three-quarter view (an oblique angle), but because the object is a flat sheet of plastic, the perspective is unfixed and can be misconstrued as a straight-on profile of a funny boot, which is the way one reviewer described it. "It occurred to me that that's the way the whole sex trade scene is treated by the straight culture; it's a cartoon flattened out," says Snyder. This tweaking of visual perspective is a game Snyder plays with the viewer, revealing visual as well as cultural assumptions in the wink of an eye. His use of punning titles and double entendre are additional ways the artist keeps his work at arm's length from literal readings or pure representation.

Plexiglas is both opaque and reflective, and has been Snyder's favorite medium since the early '70s. Depending on the application, the artist has modified the material to cast colored shadows, glow eerily from within, or reflect the images of viewers off its mirrored surface. The commercial material has a modern sensuality well suited to Snyder's investigations of popular culture, but it also represents his ambivalent relationship to current art trends.

"The trajectory of 20th century art has



PHOTO BY MIKE TRUTTER

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Hills Snyder in his studio

Plexiglas

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been about getting rid of [the artist's] hand. Hand is persona non grata," comments Snyder. "It started with photography and the notion of what photography did to painting. Now that we have photographs, why paint a picture of a realistic space? Duchamp has a lot to do with it, too. This is just something I've found; my hand had nothing to do with it. There has been a mistrust of sentimentality or romanticism, which is associated with the hand of the artist or the author as genius."

Snyder's art manages to straddle this evolutionary divide between the crafted object and the anonymous image. Each piece begins with a wooden template that is carefully

worked by hand. The template is then given over to an industrial process that follows the mark of the artist's hand with special machines. The result is a personal statement that sits at several removes from the artist, much like the work's cultural references that ripple and echo across time.

"I'm not a rigorous minimalist trying to paint myself out of the picture," claims Snyder. "That kind of recognition of and simultaneous repudiation of the going thing in the art world appeals to me. I want to have an understanding of those things, but I don't want to necessarily get bought off by them. I'm still just a guy who likes to make nice objects." ■

First Friday exhibit and events listings appear on page 24.

