Rachel Hecker at ArtPace
"What Becomes a Legend Most?"

by John Ewing

Does the slogan help you remember? Carol Channing, Luciano Pavarotti, Liza Minnelli draped in Blackglama furs. This advertising campaign epitomized a certain kind of pop culture iconography, setting a new standard for indulgent luxury far removed from the earthly, quotidian world. Of course, it was the stars who interested us. We couldn't have cared less about the furs, only that they provide a proper context for those celebrated faces.

Indeed, celebrity is the only context for them. In his essay, "The Face of Garbo," Roland Barthes comments on this brand of idol worship which lifts celebrities free of petty constraints and relegates them to our collective fantasy. "Garbo," he writes, "belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image... which could be neither reached nor renounced."

Houston artist Rachel Hecker traffics in this currency of the celebrated face with "Dead Yankees," her show of paintings at ArtPace. "If I could see myself as others see me," might be an appropriate subtitle for two pieces in which faces are depicted as highly-charged icons. The dichotomy between reality and mystique generates a wonderful tension as we sort out the person from the perception.

"Falsement" is a large, titillating work that is both seductive and jarring. Central to the piece is a sensously-rendered Ralph Fiennes garbed in "Lawrence of Arabia" robes and headdress. We first consume the utter beauty of the face, the luminous blue eyes encircled by the robes' impossible whiteness. But, we quickly get wise to the work's trickery, its "falsement." "Lawrence of Arabia" introduced some of the 60's most potent and exotic images, making an icon of its young star, Peter O'Toole. Why, then, is Ralph Fiennes, a young actor of promise, chosen to replace him? Because myth making, as a national pastime, is work never finished. We enjoy this new star. We want to canonize him because of his look, his Royal Academy credentials, his brilliant performance in an iconographic film by another film icon. Fiennes has the potential. He's got the goods.

Hecker is a savvy promulgator of pop culture. She recognizes a painting for what it is today. Paintings are screens - literal and figurative. They are cinematic projections and pixelated computer graphics. They are both dream images and T.V. The screen is larger, more inclusive, than it used to be, when Garbo was Queen or when movie stars sold fur coats. Hecker thwarts this rigid, humorless idolatry with cartoon images. We see the actor contextualized in his myth. He's poised and melancholic, suffering from movie star myopia. He's private and also on display, detached and "playing to the audience" at the same time. The cartoon butterfly off his shoulder, suffering from a pass too near a pink hot cheek, is "US." We are the public, that which watches yet historically isn't watched. Graceless and out of place, we are in the scene where Tom and Jerry dance with cinema's sympathetic master, Gene Kelly. Kelly is already a figment of our cultural imagination, a beloved icon. More animation was redundant, a poignant reminder of the improbability of our ever dancing with the man or entering the dream.

"Damn Yankee," another large canvas, is a counter point to "Falseness." It is a different sort of adoration iconography without mythol-
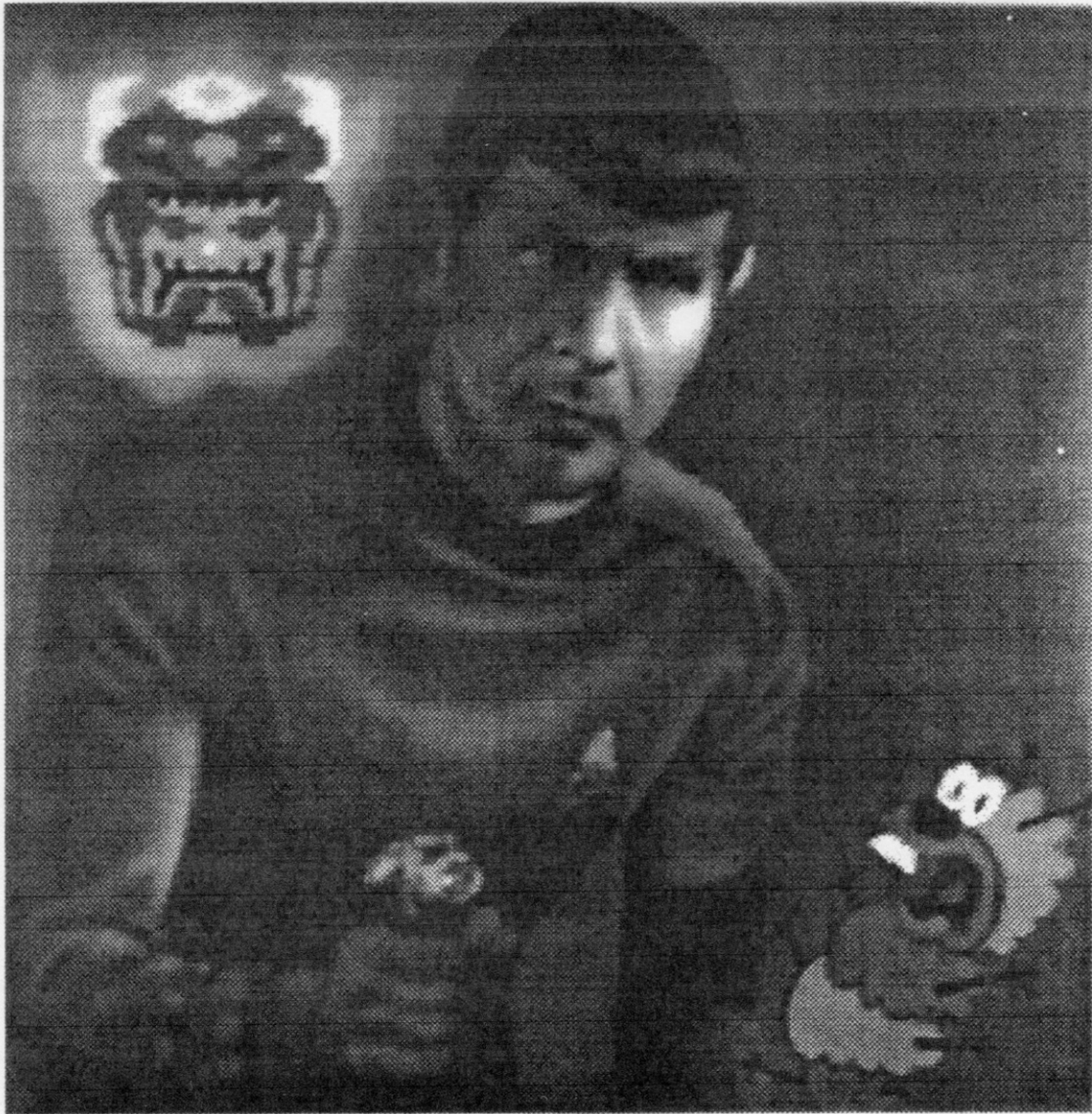
"Hypothetical Therapy" by Rachel Hecker. Acrylic on canvas, 1996, 72 x 72"

ogy. It's the coolly finessed brain child of the media establishment. Hecker presents dual portraits of serial-killer Jeffrey Dahmer. The left half, the left hemisphere, shows Dahmer's star pose. It's the now-famous courtroom profile from his arraignment, a photograph picked up by every newspaper in the country. This is the context of Dahmer's celebrity, the visual we associate with the man and the media event. It's an unassuming and blandly-handsome face,

"Falsement" by Rachel Hecker. Acrylic on canvas, 1996, 72 x 72"

all the more intriguing when contrasted with the grizzly crime-scene scenarios that followed. In Hecker's painting, that same head floats against a white polkadotted baby-blue background, a uniform plane of unrelenting banal-

ity. The only mitigating element, the only release, is an intricately-detailed black fly resting on a polkadot. It's "US" again, the "fly on the wall," ineffectual by nature.

The right-brain right half is the Dahmer we

"1961, 1966." by Rachel Hecker.
Acrylic on canvas

didn't see, the one that might have been real. A child's scribbled head dominates this space. The fleshy nose and lips and the fixed eyes sit atop a wide gash of red paint, limbless and inconsolable. A crazy cartoon head is stenciled below it, an odd, wild-eyed character with big ears and a gaping mouth. We don't know if the mouth is open to laugh or scream. It's the horror of cartoons, the horror that can't recognize itself. There is a sample of the polkadot pattern, a nascent harbinger of the personal dilemma to come. And in the lower corner, there is an intractable icon from the '60's. The flower decal, with its unnatural colors, was so simple and pervasive a symbol in its era that it almost seems coded, now. A generation's cryptic propaganda.

What Hecker is doing isn't really about exploring forms, space or color. Yes, those elements play a part, but only in so far as they compel us to ponder context. What is the context of these images? What is the context of their presentation? What occurs when Hecker combines cultural material from different contexts? Where are we, or rather, where does this painting say we are? Cezanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire is indeed real. You can visit it. But his paintings of the mountain are also real, and encountering them is a tangible experience of color, shape and light, as cohesive and self-contained a moment as one finds in nature. I don't know that Hecker's pieces work this way, but neither do I believe they must. However, I wonder if they stand alone, a context unto themselves. Or do they merely remember and refer to legends?