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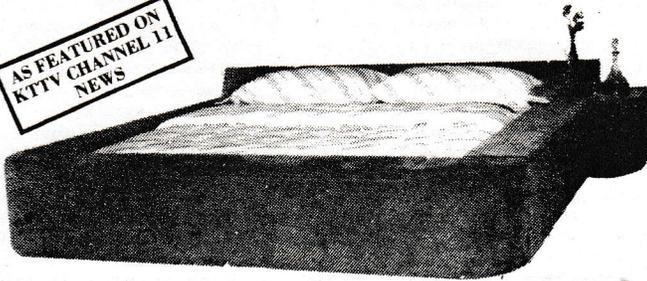


Photo: Ron Francis

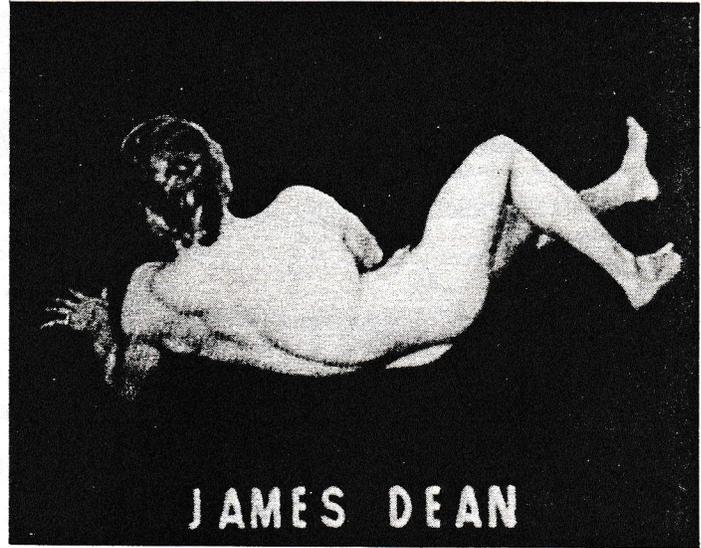


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# Ben Chase's Obscured Objects of Desire



JAMES DEAN

by Hunter Drohojowska

**I**n this sober field of art criticism, you rarely have a reason to invite readers out to the bars. The other evening at the Lhasa Club, I discovered a legitimate opportunity in a recent videotape by Ben Chase. The tape also is being shown at Chippendales and Greg's Blue Dot, sandwiched amidst record promo

videos, but hard to miss since it is composed entirely of nude men.

Chase didn't debut his tape at such unconventional locations out of desperation. The club context is significant to the tape's content. It is structured to blend both visually and aurally with the social hustle of the disco ambience. Images of unclothed men flash with the staccato independence of a slide show to the background theme of a bubbly funk beat. Since there is no narrative, at any point a viewer could glance up from a beer, watch for a few seconds, and glean the implications of the entire tape.

Without titles or credits, the first nude model snaps on the screen in living color. A slight wind rustles his hair so that you know he is more than a photograph. Nordic and muscular, he is presented in a sequence of four classic reclining positions, both front and back. His face is always averted, so he remains idealized and anonymous. Each pose is subtitled with the name of a celebrity. Quite an eclectic range are presented: James Dean, Errol Flynn, Joe D'Allesandro, Bobby Darin, Paul Getty, Jr., Rudolph Nureyev, and Grand Funk Railroad among them. After each such image, there appears a black-and-white photo of the matching celebrity, also in the buff. Some of these photos are candid, some are film stills, some are suspiciously manipulated. An odd little beep tone accompanies the presentation of each celebrity, as though this were some quiz show like "Hollywood Nudes." The photos of the celebrities remain on the screen only four seconds, barely enough time to discern the details of each grainy image. Since the whole idea strains credibility (Is that really ...?), you become eager to resolve the ambiguities and look closely to justify the name with

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the body. The curiosity and desire are natural but impossible to fulfill. The tape is edited flirtatiously, offering glimpses of intimate knowledge yet withholding, ultimately leaving viewers unsatisfied. This structure is wholly intentional and acts as a reflection of the club context, the locus of frustrated desires.

Although Chase's tape may sound manipulative, it's perhaps best to see it as an analysis of the associations our culture attributes to power and vulnerability; the power of artist and audience, and the

relative power of the men in the tape. All are unclothed but they are separated as figures who are either nude or naked.

Critic John Berger has written of the differences between nudity and nakedness. "The nude is always conventionalized — and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art... To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not be recognized for oneself. To be naked is to be without disguise... Nudity is a

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form of dress."

The sophistication of Chase's perceptions lies in the comprehension and conscious reversal of this concept. The celebrities, usually seen as untouchable and idealized, are rendered human in their unprotected state, caught in an indiscreet moment of nakedness. The unknown model, on the other hand, achieves a level of authority in assuming formalized poses. In accepting such role reversals, the viewer comes to understand that the celebrity's power is only intact as a public persona. When mystery and distance dissolve, so does the celebrity's position. This demystification is taken even further by Chase. He has chosen men who are archetypically male: actors, body-builders, porno stars, athletes. In losing the force of their mystique, they are emasculated, not elevated.

No doubt all of this contributed to Chase's decision to show the tape in clubs where exhibitionism of one sort or another creates small-scale celebrityhood, where people go to feel like stars and objects of desire. Nor does it matter that Chase's tape is frosted with irony. A club audience may well accept this tape for what it is — pictures of naked movie stars. Once again the issue of power is addressed. In the club, rather than an art gallery, the audience will interpret this tape according to their own heritage. And the crowd at each club will have different reasons for believing that it's there. As I mentioned before, the context will determine the content, and neutralize the legacy of art.

Chase's video is a form of underground art, an infiltration of not only a popular medium, but a popular context. This is commonly being associated with the post-modernist aesthetic. It's guerilla art, not working against the system, but working within it. In a method akin to performance artist Laurie Anderson's best-selling album, Chase has created high art for a popular context. ■



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