

Eric Orr, a veteran Venice artist, sits back in his chair and smiles. "I view 'Young Turks' as younger artists (rather than more established artists) who are the life blood of the system. Downtown is a good place to live when you're young and don't care about the quality of life. I would not even think of living downtown."

Stephen Seemayer feels differently. His film *Young Turks* opens with Orr's disclaimer and proceeds to chronicle a slice of life from the manufacturing zone of downtown Los Angeles. Short, subjective profiles of Seemayer's friends, 12 pioneer downtown artists, are intercut with dialogues with the area's indigenous population, the bums and drunks. It is a full color, two-hour feature, a kaleidoscopic melange of Hollywood's B-movie corn, bizarre underground existence and a few naked truths.

Over the past three years, Seemayer collected some 500 rolls of Super 8 footage of the "Turks": Bob and Bob, Linda Burnham, Woods Davy, Jim Croak, Marc Kreisel, Monique Safford, Jon Peterson, John Schroeder, Coleen Sterritt, Andy Wilf, Randy Johnsen and Seemayer himself. All these protagonists were involved through their romantic entanglements, business associations or aesthetic interests, so the making of *Turks* was a lot like home movies. (Davy and Sterritt, Kreisel and Safford, were intimate at the time; Peterson, Seemayer and Kriesel worked as business partners and landlords of industrial loft space; Burnham, editor of *High Performance* magazine, published articles on Seemayer's performance art and the book *Bob and Bob: The First Five Years*; Johnsen acted as technical adviser to Peterson and Seemayer on their sculptural projects; Wilf did paintings of the Seemayer performances.)

Seemayer has been criticized for this cliquish bias, given the fact that there are now dozens of downtown artists who might consider themselves "Turks." He responds by encouraging them all to make movies of their friends. *Turks* is subjective and, surprisingly, a soul piece of filmmaking. It's a rare art movie that can keep me awake for two hours, but this one manages. For one thing, the editing is riotous, crowded with consciously trite, humorous special effects techniques. Industrial landscapes appear out of multiple montage shots of the Atomic Cafe, the Times-Mirror and Monarch Bridal Gown buildings. Traffic jams are projected at high speeds. As an introduc-

# YOUNG TURKS

by Hunter Drohojowska

*Performance artist Stephen Seemayer's new feature-length film looks at thirteen downtown Los Angeles artists and the environment in which they thrive.*

tion to Burnham, *High Performance* magazines spiral forth and splash their headlines across the screen. All of this is entertaining and decorative, so if the movie is somewhat self-indulgent, at least it isn't dull. The other supportive element in *Turks* is the inherent irony and the absurd juxtapositions. Artists are portrayed earnestly explaining their work in one scene and participating in some hallucinogenic madness in the next.

In one episode, sculptor Jim Croak, a long-standing member of the National Rifle Association, recounts a local critic's complaint that he should make sculpture and quit acting so tough. Croak reacts by firing six rounds from his Walther semi-automatic into a target at the end of his basement firing range. Then Croak, who is also a former priest, continues to muse, "I was never really clear how the monastery affected my work," as the camera pulls back to reveal "Vegas Jesus," a monumental aluminum cross bearing a crucified sheep, the whole thing surmounted by a giant omega symbol.

In another scene, Woods Davy stands on the manicured lawn of a Brentwood collector, politely holding forth on the tension, balance and geometry of his sculpture. Then the film cuts to Davy flirting with a lusty Latina dancer at Pino's Paradise Lounge. As part of her act, she does exotic dances with live boa constrictors and tarantulas, and soon, a not-too-

sobèr Davy is holding the lethal spider in one hand and letting the snake curl around his throat. These extremes are so startling, they build an impression of unreality. The film is oddly drained of emotion, fear or even revulsion. Seemayer censored the more sensational scenes, including one where he had found a murdered bum, lying in a pool of blood, before the police arrived. Other constraints were dictated by the "Turks" themselves.

Seemayer said, "The movie could have been a lot tougher, but I would have had absolutely no friends." Initially, no one really believed that Seemayer would make his movie, and the friends acted quite candidly before the camera. It wasn't until they were asked to sign releases that panic ensued. In the three years that had passed, some of the "Turks" had achieved critical recognition, even some sales. Now they were concerned about seeing their wild oats sown all over the silver screen, worried about the reactions of critics, dealers and, most importantly, collectors. Under duress, Seemayer eliminated scenes of sex, drugs and obscenity. Even so, *Young Turks* remains R-rated.

Undeniably, some of the most interesting scenes in *Turks* are the derelicts and street people, pushing the proverbial shopping carts of rags and cans. Seemayer never treats them with condescension. They are just part of the community and, instead of pity, a certain

It is established for a bum like Tony, he says, "Everybody's got alibis. I say, fuck that shit, mister! I'm here because I want to be here." In the end, the derelicts are more independent than the "Turks." But then, they have less to lose.

**A**lthough he has made numerous short films, Seemayer is better known as a performance artist. As one of his more notorious acts, he walked to San Diego, carrying a cross that held a video monitor of the Pope. He's been doing performance since high school, when he would set up a bicycle ramp and con the neighborhood children into kneeling, heads down, in front of the ramp. Then he would light a pair of brooms on fire, set one on either side of the ramp, and race his bicycle over the ramp and hopefully, over the children.

Seemayer is a native of Hollywood, and the third of his four fathers was a filmmaker. He grew up with film, and though this is his first feature, it is definitely not his last. He is already planning to do a tape of Milano Kazanjian's recent performance "Morales Yamamoto," as well as a script called *Wunderbar*, the account of one hellish evening at Al's Bar when even the most sane and civilized personality is finally seduced into complete debauchery. Seemayer insists that this is fiction.

Clearly, Seemayer's art is characterized by an attention to the spectacular, and *Young Turks* is no exception. It will premiere, Hollywood Style, on July 30, at 9 p.m., 440 Seaton Street (between Fourth and Fifth Streets, one block east of Alameda). The audience will park in a lot across from the Seaton building, and Seemayer will project the film on the facing wall. This ad hoc arrangement is called the Downtown Drive-In.

Everything about *Young Turks* strikes me as something of a Los Angeles phenomenon. It's an extremely personal work, more about a lifestyle than art. It remains, nonetheless, a valid document because it shows how the art created was so intimately involved in the style of life led. Anyone familiar with the downtown area realizes that *Turks* is already history. In September, the film will be shown at the Downtown Gallery on Boyd Street, a building that will be razed within the year. As condos go up, the bums will leave and, eventually, so will the artists. One could almost say that *Turks* is less a chronicle of life than of loss and change.

In the closing scene of *Turks*, the trio



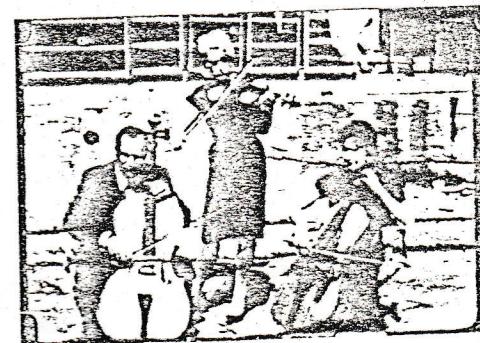
BOB & BOB

Cities. Sex. Drugs. Nightlife. Things we've done. What we did was play around in the city and find out what people want, what they're doing. We involved ourselves, we did it with them. We made work about it... Now we've plunged ourselves into America. Into the country, nature, animals. It says something about our relationship to this city, because we're coming back here and we're saying, "Look, you guys, there's something more important than Madame Wong's, there's something more important than turning around every five minutes and finding a new building behind you. There are things that last forever."



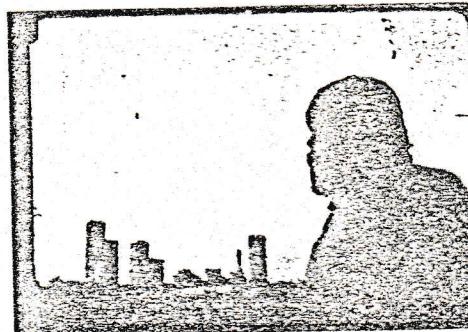
LINDA BURNHAM

This is the first place I've ever had of my own. I was married for a long time and a suburban housewife. But now I really identify with this particular spot. However, I'm getting... I think the thrill has kind of worn off... living Downtown, in an industrial situation, five years. The noise is just incredible. I couldn't sleep for a whole year, I wake up with headaches. The smog — I generally feel sort of nauseated and dizzy all the time. The dust, the dirt, the filth is just horrible. I have no heat. I guess I just want another change. I wouldn't be surprised if in a year or two, I just take out and go live in the desert.



Fat and Fucked Up (who play the film's background score) stand in formal attire, playing two cellos and a violin, out by the railroad tracks. A black Porsche pulls up and an adorable Westside couple disembark. She is on roller skates, he is wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Facing the camera, he says, "My wife and I are just not into Venice anymore. We heard that downtown is the new place to make art. I'm a painter, at least that is what I studied at Cal Arts — that and video. My wife is going to open a boutique. It looks like it could be pretty interesting."

That's Seemayer's prediction for downtown Los Angeles. Maybe it's time to look in the Valley. ■



SCHLITZ, neighborhood of Central and Olympic

It's pretty rough for me because everywhere I go people are trying to make trouble for me, and I'm not a troublemaker. I'm a good friendly guy and I try to get along with everybody and I just try to live my own life. That's all. Drink? Sure, everybody drinks, but I don't go into the bars and drink, you know. You never know who you're going to meet in bars. They might pick a fight with you or something. I'd rather drink by myself. Find a place and that's it. I wish I had more friends because friends are the only thing in the world. If I have no friends, I have nothing.



#### JOHN SCHROEDER

Well, all the stuff around me, all these little things that I've collected, I really enjoy most of them. If this is like a cave, I've got all the stuff that I like around me, right? But I look out the front window and there is this other thing...It's the streets, you know, and all the people on the streets. People that are fighting demons we can't see because they've been drinking alcohol a number of years and their brain has turned to mush. People that society has rejected. People that nobody wants. A long time ago, when I first came here, I knew what I would see would be a lesson in humanity, in what happens.



#### COLEEN STERRITT

The rocks placed on tripods. It's all balanced. There's that kind of tension set up. The work, a lot of times, because of the nature of that color and everything, it draws you in and then after you look at it again, it's real gaudy...it kind of puts you off at the same time...The way I come across to people — when I tell them that I'm an artist and I'm Downtown, and I say that I do this, they immediately don't take me seriously. Or if they do, it's like I paint pink pastel paintings or something. That is a real problem, but I can't think about it. What I concern myself with is the work and that is the most important thing.



#### MONIQUE SAFFORD

The building was filled with men painters — all painters, all men. I didn't feel very comfortable. It was like Downtown — male, macho stuff, so I made this real slave-cocksucker image, and dedicated it to the boys at 239 South Los Angeles Street...We were talking about lassitude and languidness and what kind of art you make after you fucked all day. Most people wouldn't make any art. But if you could, what kind of art would you do? And that's what I'm interested in doing, except that's what eludes me. You know, I'd like to get to that kind of essence, that kind of bottom line somehow. And that's what eludes me, I think.



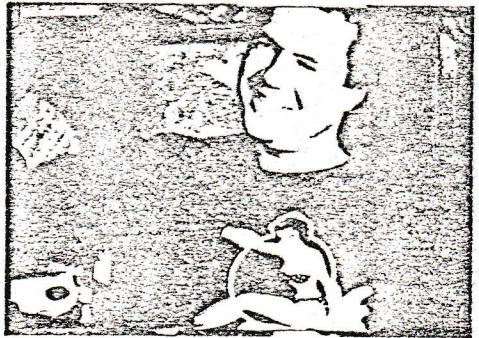
#### WOODS DAVY

I've always tried to achieve some sense of balance in what I'm doing, as a final evolved statement. I think living Downtown, and reacting to all this crazed chaos and this unexplainable violence and the rats...I'm taking all of that in and I'm trying to come out with these expressions that resolve all of this craziness into a very peaceful statement, playing off natural materials. The geometry of Downtown with the tall buildings, and the geometric structures, mapped-out city streets...dealing with the geometry against a natural element, logs or pieces of granite.



#### TONY, neighborhood of Skid Row

I'm here because I want to be here. I've got persecution problems, guilt problems, mental problems, I've got all kinds of problems. That's why I'm here, because I can't discuss them with anybody. I can't even live with them. I have a hell of a time sleepin' with them. Sometimes I don't sleep at all. It's escapism. But it's also masochism. No one is hurting me. I don't have to eat out of these shit cans if I don't want to. I could go to a restaurant and eat. But I'm so goddam filthy dirty, who the fuck would serve me? Everybody has alibis, everybody has excuses. Fuck that shit, mister. I am here because I want to be here.



#### JAMES CROAK

In a recent editorial in the Los Angeles Times, art critic William Wilson said that James Croak had to make a decision between making sculpture and acting tough. After much deliberation, I decided he was probably right. So I quit making art. I am very much interested in the energy that is conveyed through violent activity. I think this came through several events. First of all, living on 5th Street — Nickel Street, as it's called — I've seen six or seven murders in the last two years. I personally found two of the Skid Row Slasher victims.



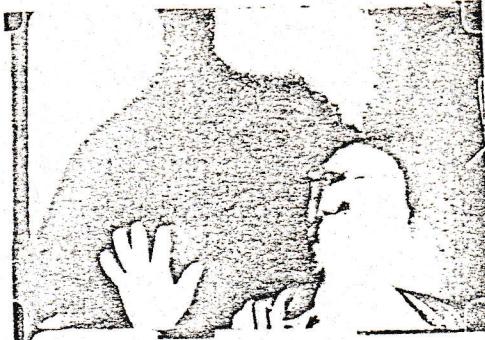
### STEPHEN SEEMAYER

(Referring to his film "The Violet Blade.) Being in the city dehumanizes and desexualizes you. In other words, after a while it can wear on you — on your sexuality, even. I thought that the way to get back at that was like, you say, "Fuck you" to the people you don't like, you say "I'm glad to get out of that fucking city," or "Fuck the city," so, in thinking about that, I saw these knives and I thought, I'd like to actualize that, stick it in here [his fly], grab the fence like an animal and —



### MARC KREISEL

There's a lot of sarcasm in my work. The humor is a way to keep myself sane. Because if you take all the craziness outside seriously, you go nuts. I mean it's just too much. Los Angeles isn't set up for making art. Its history is Hollywood and the beach. You know, art's had a tough time here. You can't compete. Hollywood's huge. There's a huge image. It's probably the largest image in the world. It's a tough competitor. Film, movies. The world gets its ideas from Hollywood.



### BUM, neighborhood of Central and Olympic

I'm a lost person, you understand? I'm a lost person. What can I do? What can I go for? Who? Will God help me? No. I've got to look to some person, abolish whatever I've done wrong, you know. I know I'm a sinner. God will never help me. I've tried him. I'm a backslider. What am I going to do now? Huh? Tell me the truth. I'm a backslider. I'm just a lost soul.



### ERIC JOHNSEN

I saw it in its virgin state before the influx of artist-hangers-on, young kids that have nothing to do but have money and buy fuckin' video-this and their life has no meaning, but they go ahead and do this fuckin' shit and they change it for people. I worked in the community. I worked for Terminal Hardware. There's nobody down here that's actually worked in the community and been part of the economic structure of Downtown. The people that talk about economic structure are dealing with art galleries and they don't get shit on their fuckin' feet.



### ANDREW WILF

I was already trying to loosen up in the style of painting because what was exciting at one time for me came to be a drag, a laborious chore. I went through about ten paintings where I just trashed them afterwards. Making that change was really difficult and I was getting quite despondent. That's when I started drinking heavily and on a regular basis. We got kicked out of the studio because I threatened to get a gun and kill the landlord. We don't have any money. I took 50 Valiums at 5 mgs. today and got thrown out of the gallery that's representing me, and drank, and they want me to go to Schick Center and they want me to pay \$8,000 and I want my sodium pentothol and I haven't painted in two months. I don't care about making any paintings right now.



### JON PETERSON

I got the idea of doing this one-person architecture that would have as a part of the total work a real inhabitant. I wasn't sure if they would really be used, but I thought they might, so I built some and put them up, and they were used. I put them in Skid Row, in Downtown L.A. Most of them were right across the street from my studio, where bums have been sleeping for years, and I'd kind of been observing them. They were used much more than I ever thought they would be. When it's out on the street it's like a throwaway, but when it's in a gallery it becomes a precious object, so it kind of reflects the society itself. The way it moves on different levels reflects the way people move, are looked at, and perceived on different levels.