

Art

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# The Crocodile Tears of Douglas Huebler

**C**rocodile tears: to cry falsely, an insincere display of grief. "Crocodile Tears" is what Douglas Huebler has titled his latest series of work — fictional texts arranged in apparent narratives but contradicted by the accompanying photographs and aphorisms. The series is his most appealing, amusing, wry body of work — shaggy dog stories in the costume of conceptual art, really. They represent the logical evolution of a long career devoted to exploring the metastatic nature of perception, appealing to the viewer's imagination.

A rare survey of Huebler's work chronicling that evolution from 1968-1984, organized by artist/critic James Huginin, is on view at the L.A. Center for Photographic Studies through July 7. (Although Huebler, a founder of Conceptual Art, has shown regularly at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York since 1970, he has had but one show here since he came to serve as head of the art program at California Institute of the Arts in 1976.)

Huebler is the source of the oft-quoted Conceptual Art dictum, "The world is full of objects more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." Since abandoning minimal sculpture in 1968, he has combined photographs and texts to deconstruct the apparent meaning of both, thus challenging a viewer's cultural-

ly determined perceptions to offer new possibilities for interpreting the mundane. He always approached these enterprises with a sense of play. In 1971, he declared that for the rest of his life, he would

"photographically document, to the extent of (his) capacity, the existence of everyone alive."

"Crocodile Tears" is the most recent result of this impossible, absurdist task. These "brief fictions" continue to examine the way we perceive, a la *Rashomon*, the inconsistencies that are inherent in social interaction — with myriad elements of power, desire, and irony.

Set in the art world, these common characteristics take on a tone of high humor. For example, Howard, an older artist, struggles in obscurity for two decades with his unpopular figurative expressionism. Then, with the return of the figure, and New Image painting, he rushes to the galleries, certain he's found his time. But they consider him too old.

Another tale features Rudi Wexler, a German artist of the 1940s famed for his ability to paint in the style of the Masters. A portrait of an SS leader, however, proves unsatisfactory. Otto Froesch is displeased with the nose, and his less-than-humane countenance. If only Wexler would paint another, to the leader's

satisfaction, Froesch could help the artist and his family out of Germany.

These tales of power and manipulation, so familiar on *Dallas*, are heightened when represented as part of the "pure" world of art. Huebler has called the tales "a self-critical description of a general situation." "Artists get themselves into a *Fate* where they become *Kafkaesque* victims." Huebler invents in order to deconstruct our perceptions of the ambience surrounding art, as much as what art might be. Each of these texts is hung with a photograph or painting that is relational, so Huebler's stories are more fully dimensional.

Huebler has also decided to write "Crocodile Tears" as a comic strip which will be featured in the *Weekly* for the next ten weeks as part of the Museum of Contemporary Art's "In Context" series. (See the "Insights" page for Julia Brown's introductory essay.) In bringing his conceptualist concerns to the forum of the mass media, Huebler makes an elegant, intelligent entrance to the post-modern era. ■

