

## Brian Moss at Whittier College

**B**rian Moss's exhibition *Into the Void* subtly explores the experiences of personal loss and mourning while simultaneously celebrating our collective survival. As incongruous as this sounds, the exhibition successfully balances these contradictory notions in a variety of mediums and artistic approaches. *Pyramid* combines delicate wads of the artist's hair piled on single sheets of toilet paper. Each square is covered by its own plastic box and arranged into a pyramid that is lit from underneath. Both haunting and humorous, the work references Victorian memento mori as a constant reminder of our encroaching death but does so in such a formal

and clean manner as to simultaneously suggest the power of humans to order, reorder and make sense of whatever is found. What's funny is that the hair is gently piled onto each paper square like hors d'oeuvres and the display sits prominently in the gallery like a buffet table. That the artist lets us chuckle while contemplating our mortality keeps the show from becoming morose and helps make the exhibition accessible.

*Where Am I When I'm Asleep?* is a series of three pinhole camera images exposed for the duration over night. The clear, sharp image of the bed and night table

are contrasted with the blurry, ghost-like body, and the tiny (about 3 inches) circular images float in an expanse of blackness on 11-by-14-inch paper. The circular image at once suggests a surveillance photograph as well as the original pictures done with the Kodak #1 camera from 1888. This gives them a timeless quality and heightens the impression that we, too, are a spirit hovering over the restless body.

In the gallery wall statement, Moss tells of his experience of losing a loved one to a slow death and his work with cancer survivors in Delaware and California. Throughout his artwork the contradictory issues of decay and growth, stillness and movement and darkness and light are explored and poignantly suggested in *Self Portrait*. In it an image of the artist's head is seen in profile while lying down and appears as four X-rays in light boxes mounted on the wall. His prone position is passive and lets us examine him as a specimen, either alive or dead. His fluffy, curly hair is a sensual element that keeps the aura of life ever-present while the deep blackness of his skin suggests the stillness of death. The light boxes add a clinical aspect to the work and reminds us of the endless

doctor visits and hospital stays that often precede death.

Moss tells of scouting the gallery location before assembling and creating the work for the show. As with many installation artists who incorporate disparate elements, he has a collection of ephemera and "stuff" at his disposal, which he used for this exhibition. When viewing the space, he came across a small bronze plaque inconspicuously placed under a window that commemorated World War II veterans. This innocuous sign was surely a spark of inspiration for the artist and a prophetic reminder that death, though highly personal, can have profound and public expressions.

—Thomas McGovern

Brian Moss: *Into the Void* closed in January at Greenleaf Gallery, Whittier College.

Thomas McGovern is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.

Brian Moss, *Pyramid*, 1999, hairballs, toilet paper, acrylic, wood, fluorescent lights, 17" x 32" x 32", at Whittier College.

