

ARTS & LITERATURE

The personal is public

ARTIST DELVES INTO 'STRANGE AND INTERESTING SPACE'
WHERE PRIVATE AND COLLECTIVE LIFE MERGE

Germaine Koh: Personal

Agnes Etherington Art
Centre
Until Aug. 24

EVERY NOW AND THEN, A CONCEPTUAL artist comes along whose work is filled with such clarity of purpose that it manages to wash away all of the unfocused, self-indulgent pap that threatens to ruin conceptual art for me as a category.

Germaine Koh is such an artist, and her new show at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre has made me forget all about the guy who recently set up a cage inside a gallery and sat behind bars all day trying to become a dog for the benefit of visitors.

Koh, a 30-year-old Malaysian-born artist who was raised in British Columbia and who now teaches at the University of Ottawa, has put together a terrific show combining elements from a larger body of work that has its roots in 1960s Fluxus actions, minimalism and artists' multiples.

UN Sung LABOR

Fascinated with the everyday and with the unsung labor that goes into the creation of any community, Koh has committed herself to lifelong projects such as Knitwork, in which she unravels sweaters and hats in order to re-knit them into an enormous new mass of wool, and Self-Portrait, in which she paints a new portrait of herself over the old one several times a year, keeping only a photographic trace of the earlier images.

Personal takes up some of the same concerns about identity in flux, but hones in on the specific question of how the personal and the private relate to the public.

"To stamp something as personal ... is to plead with others to treat it as such, so to some extent it's always a hopeful or defensive move," Koh said in a recent lecture about the work.

"The distance between claiming something is personal and it actually being so is a strange and interesting space."

One part of the show exists in the classified section of this newspaper (June 28 to July 5), where Koh took out personal ads offering bits of unsorted and seemingly autobiographical information about her love of driving, bad back and fears of offending an unidentified man with whom "negotiations [are] failing."

Sandwiched between ads for mas-



ARTSPACES

By Lee Parpart

sage parlors and psychic hotlines ("Spiritual Connections!!! The Truth Starts Here!!!"), Koh's notices interrupt the usual flow of services and dollars by seeking nothing and offering only a tiny, mysterious window on the banal details of a life.

Familiar and distant at the same time, these diary entries lay in wait for the chance reader whose sense of what constitutes a 'personal' ad is briefly turned upside down.

The rest of the show makes use of lost and discarded snapshots and portrait photos that Koh has found on the streets of New York, Ottawa and Montreal over the past five years. She turns the snapshots into glossy, 4 x 6 postcards and displays them in a rack, while the studio portraits are placed in cheap, off-the-rack frames.

By giving these personal images a public presence, Koh not only elevates them from the particular to the collective, but collapses the signifying systems of each realm. The sealed world of the tourist image is invaded by the scratchy and often poorly composed ephemera of amateur photography, while the privacy of the snapshot is undermined by repetition, as the images organize themselves into categories such as 'pets,' 'parties,' and 'end-of-roll shots.'

COMMONPLACE

The show's curator, Jan Allen, points out that the content of the postcards is so "inane commonplace and personal, so deeply specific, that they cross into the territory of the profoundly generic - not the digested genericism of mass culture, but a refreshing one extracted from the cracks of represented culture."

While the postcards contain reassuring information about where and when the images were found, the portraits are more haunting and ambiguous, offering only sketchy details that could indicate where or when the person in the picture died or was lost.

Drained of the irony that peppers the rest of the show, it is the portraits and their hint of memorial sadness that cements the various parts of Personal, giving the work an emotional depth that's too often lacking in art about ideas.

Catherine Dolcini,
PaintingsEdward Day Gallery
(Toronto) July 12-31

THE EDWARD DAY GALLERY'S NEW Toronto location opens today with a show of paintings by recent Queen's University fine arts graduate Catherine Dolcini. Dolcini, a former Napanee resident who studied in Chicago and taught art at Loyalist College before earning her BFA at Queen's, is the first artist to christen the parallel gallery.

Her contribution to the recent BFA show at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre was an oil painting titled "Julie's Green Chair," a deceptively simple image of an empty chair that seems to take on a personality of its own.

The same painting (or a similar one in a series) graces the invitation to the Edward Day show, which will take place at 33 Hazelton Ave., in the heart of Toronto's gallery district.

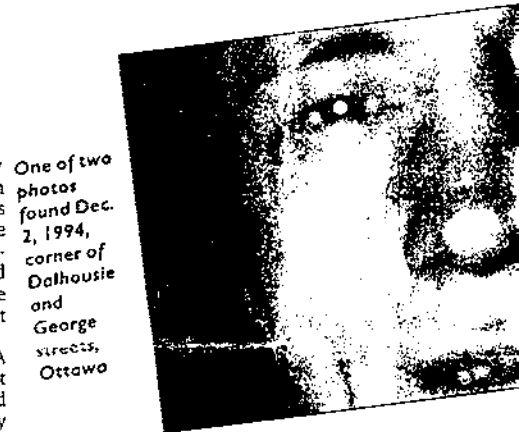
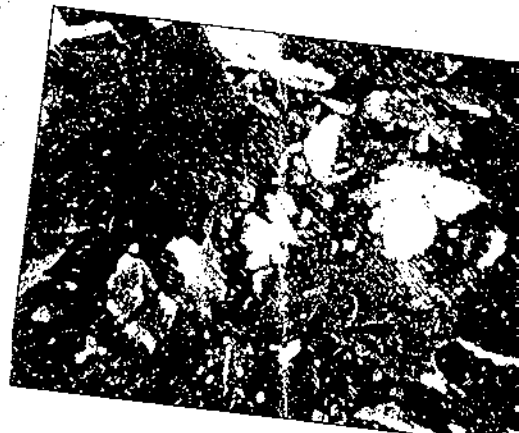
The new gallery is said to be very similar to the one here, with high ceilings, hardwood floors and (we can only hope) the same warm, folksy approach taken by EDG staff in Kingston.

In a world where art patrons are often snubbed if they happen to be wearing anything less than Armani, the Edward Day has always stood out as a beacon of down-home friendliness.

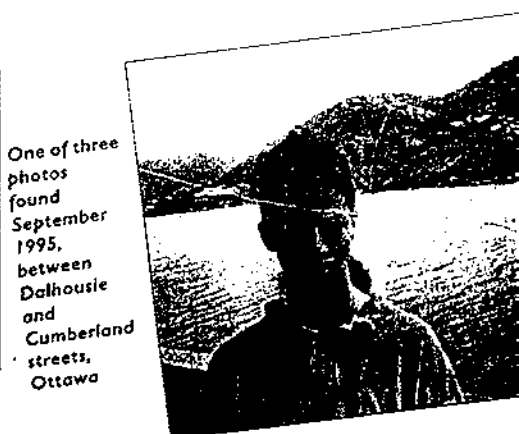
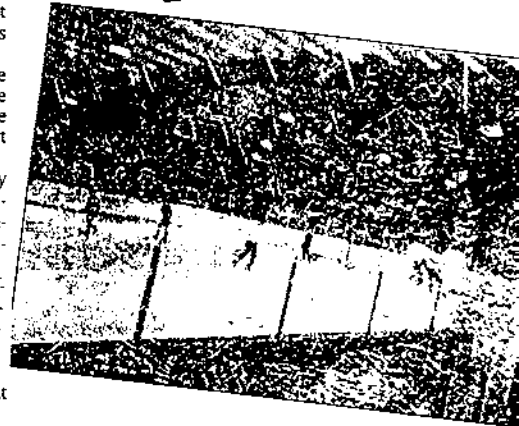
It would be lovely to see a bit of that goodwill spread to the Toronto scene.



Chair by Catherine Dolcini, one of the paintings in a show in Toronto



One of two photos found Dec. 2, 1994, corner of Dalhousie and George streets, Ottawa



One of three photos found September 1995, between Dalhousie and Cumberland streets, Ottawa