

Nashville

Eliane Rutishauser, Swiss visiting artist at Austin Peay State University, showed large photographic self-portraits at the Trahern Gallery (March 15.- 19.) Claiming that she wished to examine death as an „objective“ subject, she posed herself as a glamorous suicide in a sequence of four very large color images. The impact was at first like a Hollywood film: beautiful to look at but not believable – more shocking than truly disturbing. In these glossy oversized prints, Rutishauser lets us see nothing of her actual- only the external-self and asks us to consider her an object upon which things have been projected. She is now a woman who has been made-up and dressed-up and put into an exaggeratedly dramatic situation. Because she is taking on suicide, one of society's taboo subjects, Rutishauser's self portrait sequence is both brave and naive. She risks criticism by those who feel that, because of her youth, she can understand nothing of death and has no right to engage with it as an artist, but she forces herself to experience one of the truly frightening realities of youth - that feeling of being a puppet in a world beyond one's control, where the only way to participate is by turning on or off. In a large black and white photo across the gallery, Rutishauser poses as a cross-dressing man, wearing business suit and high heels and sitting on a clear plastic bubble chair, a nylon stocking mask smashing her facial features into unrecognizability. What and who she is, is left to the viewer's own assumptions and preconceptions. Another series of approximately 20 photographs shows Rutishauser as a prostitute, believably done-up in fantasy costumes modeled upon those in the photos posted outside houses in Zürich's red light district. Unlike the work of Cindy Sherman, in which the artist camouflages her identity by masquerading as a figure in readily recognizable visual quotations from popular culture, Rutishauser's photographs leave us somewhat at a loss. The location and context in most images are left purposely vague. By using her own face and body as a sort of tabula rasa upon which to project varying identities and circumstances, Rutishauser is able to bring the notion of the displacement of the self into the dialogue.

Susan Knowles, Art Papers Magazin, 28. August 1999