

Artist captures performance, photography trends

By Christopher Lyon

If there were a comedian today comparable to the 1920s' Harold Lloyd, that's who artist Bruce Charlesworth might be imitating. His photographs, videotapes and an installation, at the University of Illinois' Gallery 400, Peoria and Van Buren, present us with variations on the theme of an average guy, played by Charlesworth, threatened by an indefinable menace.

His work is an amalgam of recent trends in performance and photography, and is infused with a Midwestern variant (he lives in Minneapolis) of the fashionable anxiety-mongering of much current New York work (see, for example, Richard Bosman's show at Dart Gallery). The installation here, "Mauna Loa," unconvincingly suggests that a volcanic eruption is in progress on the other side of the walls.

Charlesworth's untitled

Cibachrome prints, from his "Trouble" series, are somewhat reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's faked film stills in which she also plays the various characters, though he presents actions, rather than attitudes.

While Sherman reflects cultural stereotypes of women as passive, Charlesworth illustrates or plays against stereotypical notions of males as active or aggressive.

Charlesworth's backgrounds are obvious sets, connecting his work with the "fabricated to be photographed" tendency in American photography. This makes his scenes look more than a little cartoonish (compared with Sherman's marginally convincing naturalism), and though it should afford him more control over color and composition, he doesn't take as much advantage of this as one might expect.

Charlesworth has done his most interesting work in



Artist Bruce Charlesworth (left) appears in an untitled print from his "Trouble" series, on view at the University of Illinois' Gallery 400.

video. Video potentially allows for the kind of intimate communication that only a trained stage performer can achieve in a live

setting. TV is, in a way, more forgiving, and the performer's limitations can even be humorously incorporated into the piece, as in

the early work of William Wegman.

In "Lost Dance Step," Charlesworth presents himself as a compulsive escape artist who wants to be a dancer. "When I'm in the box, I'm always thinking about the dance." But this promising premise gets lost in a poorly acted and ploddingly paced scenario. One is startled to discover that he had grant subsidy for this work in which the production values are almost nonexistent.

If contemporary artists are going to imitate "dancers"—i.e. the entertainers and advertisers that dominate imagemaking—then their skills must be at least as finely honed.

See "Sex-Specific: Photographic Investigations of Contemporary Sexuality" at the School of the Art Institute Superior Street Gallery, 341 W. Superior, for work by Sherman, Robert Mapplethorpe and others who have the techniques

down cold.

OPENINGS: Abstraction continues its strong showing this fall with "Abstract Painting in Chicago," opening tonight at Roy Boyd Gallery, 215 W. Superior (through Dec. 5), featuring work by area veterans including William Conger, Vera Klement, Richard Loving and Frank Piatek. Also see "Formalist Abstraction" at N.A.M.E. Gallery, 9 W. Hubbard (through Nov. 24), with work by Steve Heyman and others.

Paintings and works on paper by the late Fairfield Porter, better known by the public as a critic than a painter during his lifetime, but now recognized as a contemporary master, open Tuesday at the Arts Club of Chicago, 109 E. Ontario. Czech photographer Jan Saudek's new work also goes on view Tuesday at Jacques Baruch Gallery, 40 E. Delaware Pl.