

# The male gaze

Peter Haakon Thompson and Paul Smith cast themselves as the objects of reflection. *By Sarah Coleman*

It's probably not too much of a generalization to say that in photography, the language of self-scrutiny has belonged mostly to women. Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, and Nan Goldin are the most obvious recent examples of a trend that stretches back at least as far as Imogen Cunningham. While male photographers have tended to turn the camera outward, their female counterparts have been more willing to use their own bodies as a means to describe female experience.

For that reason alone, the photographs of Paul Smith and Peter Haakon Thompson would be fascinating even if they had no artistic merit (they do). Both photographers use themselves to explore issues of male identity; both investigate a linkage between personality and environment. Beyond that, and the fact that they're the same age (29), these two emerging artists have very little in common.

At first glance, there seems nothing unusual about Smith's photographs. Taken in British pubs, flats, and pool halls, they show a variety of peculiarly male bonding rites. Guys drink and brawl, mug for the camera while dressed in drag, or pose suggestively with a giant cucumber. The style is late-20th-century point-and-shoot, complete with overexposures and the occasional blur. These "snaps" could come from almost any young guy's college-era album.

But look closer, and you'll begin to

see that something doesn't quite gel. Studied at length, the men in Smith's photographs begin to look strangely similar. All have brown hair, a lanky build, and a smile that's both rakish and goofy. All seem recklessly uninhibited. There's a good reason for that: they're all Smith.

Welcome to the brave new world of digital photography, which — together with his depiction of "lad" culture and his gleeful exhibitionism — has catapulted Smith to the top of the artistic food chain in England. One of the latest artists to have been anointed by art mogul Charles Saatchi, Smith recently featured prominently in Saatchi's first major post-"Sensation" show, "Neurotic Realism Part One."

While he's not exactly neurotic, Smith has certainly set up his artificial world to look deeply realistic. *Fight* shows a man with a bloody nose being forcibly restrained by a friend as he lunges toward an unseen aggressor; in *Sick*, a barely animate man slumps by a vomit-splattered toilet. With its focus on luridness and squalor, Smith's work dovetails nicely with the bad-boy aesthetic of writers like Martin Amis and Irvine Welsh (with a touch of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* thrown in for good measure).

Nothing could be more different than Thompson's gently whimsical self-portraits. Now a Bay Area resident, Thompson sees his Midwestern roots as the locus of his identity. In his tiny, jewel-bright images, cornfields and forests in Minnesota and Illinois are backdrops on which the photographer imposes himself in various physical or emotional ways. At times he's engulfed by vegetation, as the giant leaf of a corn stalk cuts

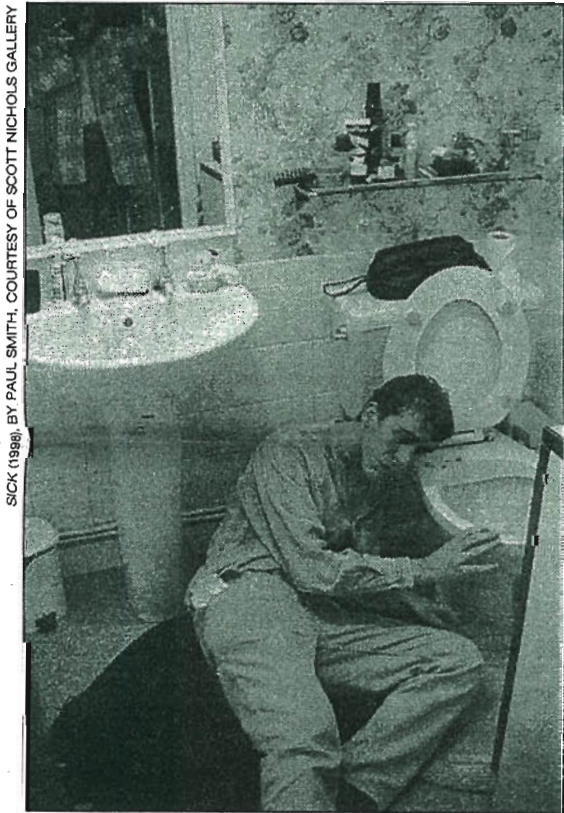
across his face, or his legs are swallowed by a field of verdant soybean plants. In other shots his hand hovers at the edge of a frame, or he's only present as the intelligence choosing and framing a shot of a distant lake or a snow-covered forest.

Smith's work uses technology and role-playing to interesting effect, but the extent to which it illuminates male behavior might be limited. I couldn't help comparing "Make My Night" with Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills," her seminal work from the early '80s in which she posed as characters from simulated B movies. Unlike the women in that series, each of whom was an entirely different character, Smith's raucous men are essentially all the same guy. In fact, that's part of his point: men, we're to believe, become pack animals when they get together in groups. Even so, compared with the spectrum of female experience Sherman evoked, "Make My Night" seems shallow. A previous series, "Artist's Rifles," in which Smith uses the same techniques of digitization to put himself in the roles of trainee soldiers, offers a more multi-layered depiction of male role-playing. Unfortunately, only two images from that series are on show here.

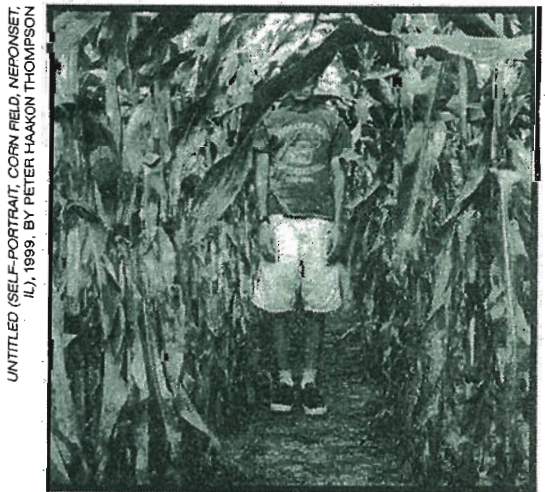
Thompson's work may not be as flashy as Smith's, and given its air of reserve, it's unlikely to be acquired by Charles Saatchi. But in his own way, Thompson might be saying something just as profound about masculinity. The old feminist battle cry "the personal is political" seems apt when applied to these lyrical images; in his quiet way, Thompson suggests that self-definition is best mediated through individual, not collective, experience. ❖

**Paul Smith and Peter Thompson.**

Through July 29. Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Scott Nichols Gallery, 49 Geary, S.F. (415) 788-4641.



SICK (1998), BY PAUL SMITH. COURTESY OF SCOTT NICHOLS GALLERY



UNTITLED (SELF-PORTRAIT, CORN FIELD, NEPONSET, IL), 1999, BY PETER HAAKON THOMPSON

**Boys 'R' Us:** Self-portraits by Paul Smith, left, and Peter Haakon Thompson reveal the varying states of young and modern male consciousness.