DIRECTIONS

BOYD WEBB

NOVEMBER 1, 1990 - JANUARY 27, 1991

Trace, 1987. Cibachrome; 48 x 60 inches. David E. Heberman, Los Angeles.

I think an artist produces his best work indirectly, without truly realizing what he is making. The work seeps out, deciding for itself when it is complete. It is like juggling a lot of cats in the air at the same time—at the right moment they form a rug.[1]

—Boyd Webb

BORN OF A QUIRKY IMAGINATION, Boyd Webb's photographs are alternately hilarious and profound, bizarre and normal, hallucinatory and real. Made in a studio, they depict impossible scenarios with a trickery so transparent that most commercial studio photographers would blanch. Look once and you see a landscape, look again and it is an old rug. A whale's barnacled underbelly is a hammock of rotting rubber studded with plums. Water and fog are sheets of clear plastic, animals inflatable vinyl, galaxies painted paper, and Mother Earth a toy ball. In Webb's world, humans assume science-fiction roles—a subterranean crawling giant, an underwater creature in business clothes, an orator from a celestial farm, the guts of a jellyfish.

But a Webb photograph is no one-line joke. After the initial wonderment and chuckle, one sees that an important idea is being presented—Webb's works send out strong moral messages about humankind's folly in relation to nature. Bolstered by titles that are brief but highly evocative, his photographs are calculated to set you thinking.

Webb, a native of New Zealand who has been working in London for nearly 20 years, is among a number of contemporary artists whose chief mode of expression is the setup photograph. The practice of inventing and photographing fictive scenes, although nearly as old as photography itself (Julia Margaret Cameron was an early adherent), has been particularly widespread since the late 1970s. Cindy Sherman's chameleon personae, William Wegman's dress-up dogs, Bernard Faucon's picnicking mannequins, Joel-Peter Witkin's brutalized Victorians, James Casebere's monochrome blockhouse cities, and Sandy Skoglund's animal nightmares are all variations within this genre. Flourishing in a time of cross-fertilization among art media—a period that has given rise to the term "photoartist"—this kind of work is both an antidote to traditional documentary photography and a stepchild of art trends of the 1960s and early 1970s. Reversing the intense, inclusive realism of such photographers as Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, the setup photograph grew out of Conceptual Art's use of sequential photographs to illustrate ideas, Performance Art's tableaux vivants, and concurrent sculpture's reordering of media to include the ephemeral and the site-specific.

Webb was a sculpture student at a progressive art school in New Zealand when he took up photography to record his own arrangements of life-cast figures of fiber glass. The medium suited his thoughtful, if slightly subversive temperament. One of his student projects was a film, shot painstakingly frame-by-frame, of an umpire overseeing an underground, off-camera tennis match. Another was a photograph of a child in a picturesque English garden whose edging fence was actually a series of dead eels frozen into arch shapes. Webb's contrariness came out full force with his degree exhibition, in which examiners were screened by a secretary before being allowed to rummage through cabinets where they found Webb's work, which included both photographs and objects.

Moving to London in 1972 to study at the Royal College of Art, Webb was apparently so taken by that dark, Old World city that he soon used its interiors, streets, and outskirts to stage and photograph witty parodies of English characters. Accompanied by preposterous written directives or explanatory texts, his photographs of the 1970s (sometimes in sequences of two) included such images as bureaucrats engaged in a tug-of-war, a "lichenologist" demonstrating his research and findings, and a nanny and perambulator tumbling over near railroad tracks. Fusing a Monty Python zaniness with the stagy deadpan of British performance artists Gilbert and George, Webb's work reflected his attraction to the clarity and didacticism of Victorian genre paintings. Inspiration also came from the work of Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), the French Dada poet and playwright whose absurd scenes flip easily into hallucination, and Sufi parables—a hippie-generation favorite—in which Persian mystics use enigmatic story lines to ascribe universal significance.

Since the early 1980s, Webb has reduced his texts into pungent one-word or one-phrase titles and refined his images into single, large-scale compositions created entirely in his studio. With a fascination for forgotten objects paralleling that of British sculptors Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow, Webb scours kitsch shops, street corners, second-hand stores, and ethnic food markets for materials to help in his setups. Models, whom he is beginning to use again after working only with props for a few years, are recruited from among friends and appropriate-looking strangers. Webb can spend from two days to a month setting up the perfect tableau. Using a large-format camera and flash, he generally

photographs two versions of the scene before creating another. Since 1982, he has used the Cibachrome process, preferred by many artists because it is archival and produces intense color. Made from transparencies, all Webb's prints are unique and mounted like tapestries inside box-like frames to reinforce their identity as art objects. "I want my work to be seen properly, like a painting or sculpture," Webb says.

Indeed, from the earliest to the most recent work in this exhibition, textures, colors, surfaces, and composition, which are often luscious or muscular, hold the fascination of certain kinds of painting or sculpture. Webb crafts startling fabrications of water, sky, planets, terrain, and plant and animal life, in cross sections, NASA-type space shots, artful tableaux recalling store displays, and idiosyncratic simulations of microscopic, aerial, and underwater photography. These surrealistic dreamscapes are also documented realities, a twin identity that makes their ecological subtext all the more disquieting.

In *Nemesis*, 1983, an ant farm-like view, a nude figure crawling underground inflates and breaks apart a miniature farmhouse in a tranquil rural scene with an impossibly large but perfectly staged parsnip crop. Is this intruder his own nemesis? Nature's nemesis? What will be the outcome of this interaction? In *Sucklings*, a diptych of 1989 that replicates a half-filled aquarium, the implications are equally open-ended. This update of the parable of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome who were raised by a she-wolf, shows two views of twins as the flesh and blood of two jellyfish embarking in opposite directions on some unknown journey. Who is digesting whom? Have marine and human life been interjoined, and will these strange organisms perish? In an era of imperiled oceans, one cannot but help make that chilling speculation.

Ecological balance teeters elsewhere in Webb's work. In *Undrained*, 1988, vinyl flamingos appear drowned in reflective "waters" beneath a postapocalyptic sunset. The discarded umbrella could be a metaphor for humanity's carelessness or the inability of technology to protect other forms of life. In *Croup*, 1988 [fig. 1] (the title refers to a bronchial disease), a sheet of clear polyethylene, which doubles as pollution and creates a curious trompe l'oeil effect with the photographic paper, has choked a flock of semi-deflated toy ducks that are displayed like trophy heads. A slightly sick scenario, it makes its point. In *Day for Night*, 1988 (the title is a Hollywood term, once immortalized by Truffaut, for the filming of nighttime scenes through a filter during the day), two groups of ensnared vinyl zebras are held playfully aloft, one like a sideways lollipop, against a stormy, Wagnerian sky. The message here is anything but lighthearted. In *Clenched*, 1985, Earth is all but obliterated by a cloven paper galaxy, while the Jupiter-like planet in *Glorious Morning*, 1986 [fig. 2], whose "moon" is an image of a Greek Cycladic sculpture, seems serene enough until you see the paper surface unraveling. Webb, who is not moralizing about ecological guilt ("That would be too straightforward, like a smack between the eyes"), nonetheless feels that "It's the only environment we have. We might as well look after it."[2]

Fig. 2. *Glorious Morning*, 1986. Cibachrome; 48½ x 60½ inches. Private collection, courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.

Some works are far more oblique in their references to the state of the Earth, raising, particularly in those images using the figure, a torrent of questions. What is happening, for instance, in *Nourish*, 1984 [fig. 3]? Why is the young man sucking the human-like breast of an enormous creature? Is this bizarre scenario a soft-core put-on or earnest metaphor? In this masquerade, the breast is a painted vegetable, barnacles are fruit, whale skin is rubber, water is air, and the man—looking like a corporate intern undergoing a strange initiation rite—is wet but not submerged. What about the megaphone-wielding plainswoman in *Supplicant*, 1984? Riding high in a sculpted-carpet landscape in an evocation of the Earth's curve so fake we can see the spotlight behind it, is she shouting something vitally important meant to affect the globe? A warning? A sermon? And what is the agenda behind *Kibbutz*, 1985? A metaphor for Israel? What are we to make of its

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Fig. 2. *Glorious Morning*, 1986. Cibachrome; 48½ x 60½ inches. Private collection, courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.

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Fig. 1. *Croup*, 1988. Cibachrome; 62¼ x 48¾ inches. Private collection, Oklahoma City.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Christchurch, New Zealand, July 3, 1947. Educated at the Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, Diploma in Fine Arts, 1971, and Fine Arts with Honours in Sculpture, 1972; Royal College of Art, London, 1972-75, M. A., 1975. Lives and works in London.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1976 Robert Self Gallery, London (also 1977).

1978 Konrad Fischer Gallery, Düsseldorf; Jean & Karen Bernier, Athens, Greece (also 1982); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, *Boyd Webb* (also 1987, and tour).

1979 Sonnabend Gallery, New York (also 1981, 1985, 1989).

1981 Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London (also 1984, 1989); Auckland (New Zealand) City Art Gallery, *Boyd Webb: Photographic Works 1976–1981*, and tour.

1982 Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, *Boyd Webb*, and tour.

1983 Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, *Boyd Webb*, and tour; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, *Boyd Webb: Salon Photos*.

1985 Northern Illinois University Art Gallery in Chicago, *Boyd Webb*, and tour.

1986 Adelaide (Australia) Festival of Art, *Boyd Webb*, and tour; Jean Bernier, Athens, *Boyd Webb* (also 1990).

1988 Myers/Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California, *Boyd Webb* (also 1990).

1990 Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain (F. R. A. C.) du Limousin, Limoges, France, *Boyd Webb*.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1975 Robert Self Gallery, London.

1976 Künstlerhaus, Graz, Austria, *Zeit, Worte, und die Kamera/Time, Words, and the Camera*, and tour.

1980 Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, *Boyd Webb/Norbert Wolf*; Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, England, *Artist and Camera*, and Arts Council of Great Britain tour; *Photography and the Medium*, and British Council tour; Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, *Invented Images*.

1982 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *The 4th Biennale of Sydney: Vision in Disbelief*; Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, West Germany, *Documenta 7*.

1983 Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, *Images Fabriquées*.

1986 Frankfurter Kunstverein and Schirn Kunsthalle, *Prospect 86*; Forty-Second Venice Biennale, *Aperto 86*.

1987 Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, *'Blow up': Zeitgeschichte*, and tour; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, *Cross References: Sculpture into Photography*.

1989 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *The Art of Photography 1839-1989*, and tour.

1990 Tate Gallery, Liverpool, *Lifelines/Lebenslinien: vier Künstler aus Grossbritannien/Four British Artists*, and tour; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, *8th Sydney Biennale*; Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, *British Art Now, Japan 1990–91*, and British Council tour.

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CHECKLIST

Nemesis, 1983. Cibachrome; 37½ x 47¼ inches. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Lillian Castell Photograph Fund and Justin Smith Purchase Fund.

Nourish, 1984. Cibachrome; 59½ x 47¾ inches. Southampton City Art Gallery, Great Britain.

Supplicant, 1984. Cibachrome; 48 x 59¾ inches. Ernst and Marlene Wossman, Cologne.

Clenched, 1985. Cibachrome; 48 x 60 inches. Continental Insurance, New York.

Kibbutz, 1985. Cibachrome; 60 x 48 inches. Jedermann Collection, N. A.

Coppice, 1986. Cibachrome; 60½ x 48½ inches. Private collection.

Glorious Morning, 1986. Cibachrome; 48½ x 60½ inches. Private collection, courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.

Medallion, 1986. Cibachrome; 60 x 47¾ inches. Jean Bernier, Athens, Greece.

Truss, 1987. Cibachrome; 48 x 60 inches. David E. Hoberman, Los Angeles.

Croup, 1988. Cibachrome; 62¼ x 48¾ inches. Private collection, Oklahoma City.

Day for Night, 1988. Cibachrome; 62¼ x 48¾ inches. Mr. and Mrs. Edward Elson, Atlanta.

Undrained, 1988. Cibachrome; 48¾ x 62¼ inches. Private collection, courtesy Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London.

Sucklings, 1989. Cibachrome; two prints, each 62¼ x 48¾ inches. Mrs. Kathleen Watt, Los Angeles.

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