

SMITH/STEWART
I LOVE YOU
TO DEATH

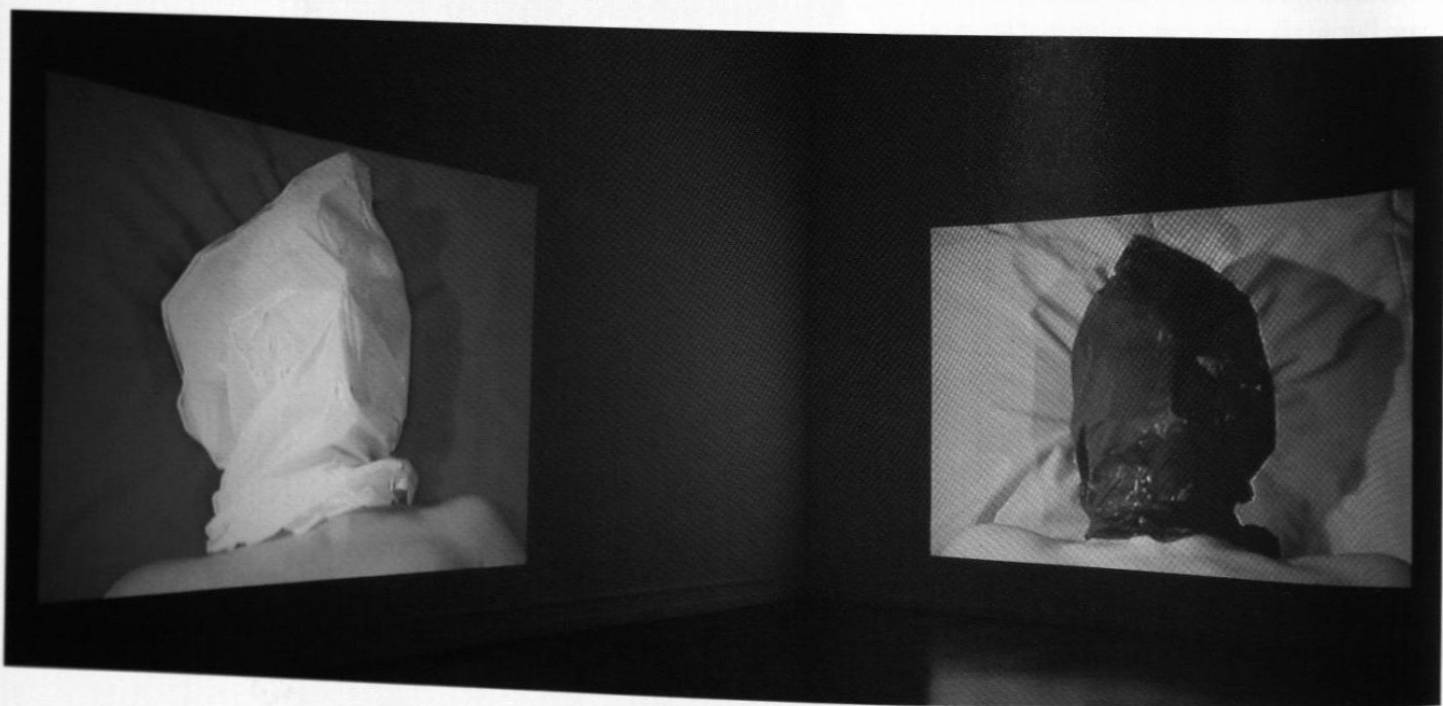
Gilda Williams

"EXPIRING FOR LOVE is beautiful but stupid," writes Jenny Holzer in one of her early truisms, instantly erasing the romantic heroism of the once-noble, Goethean love-suicide. As with Holzer, the main concerns in the work of artistic duo Stephanie Smith and Edward Stewart are the big three: love, sex, and death (usually in that order). Inserted chronologically and conceptually between these are such lesser corollaries as dependency, pain, and perversion, also prominently depicted in the pair's larger-than-life video installations. Like Gilbert & George's, these works are completely reliant on self-portraiture. Yet Smith/Stewart's world is reduced to a nation of two; here, there is no room for lover boys, hangers-on, or witnesses. And unlike other sexually and emotionally explicit work featuring the artist in the first person (say, Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual*

Dependency), the events are staged and metaphorical, not autobiographical *vérité*. Smith/Stewart's union is manifested in the work not only in that which is depicted, but in the planning and discussions we can assume lie behind it. This is a theater of love, or a kind of operating theater, in which the mechanics by which a sexual union survives are laid out, dissected, and ultimately permitted to triumph.

With Glasgow-based Smith/Stewart (Smith was born in Manchester; Stewart in Belfast), it is apparent as soon as each video opens that the actions depicted—whether, say, lovebite kissing, or underwater, assisted breathing, as in the diptych *Sustain* (1995)—will repeat themselves throughout the length of the piece. There is no "natural" framework bracketing the performances, and the video's course of events is revealed almost instantly. Unlike sex, there is no

BREATHING SPACE, 1997.
FROM VIDEO DIPTYCH.
COURTESY AUSTRALIAN
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obvious point of climax or closure; instead, as in most romances, the works endure until one of the partners has had enough; or they simply fade out when the passion wanes and there is no new direction to follow. What makes the work so tense and unforgettable is the subtle balance between delight and disgust, and the ambiguity that exists between who is receiving pain, and who is inflicting (or providing) it.

In *Sustain*, for example, a torso is insistently and gruesomely covered with burning red love bites. Here, the body is both a giver and a receiver. But of what? And who exactly is doing the sustaining here? Is it the quiescent body, covered in bruises and scars, or the assiduous lover, summoning the interest and the saliva to keep up the labor of love? As in much of the team's work, we immediately realize we are being confronted with human flesh, but it is so close or distorted as to be unrecognizable. We are uneasy, struggling to discern whether the body in question is male or female, and precisely which part of its anatomy we have been invited to stare at. It takes a moment to recognize the male chest as it has been cropped so as to appear headless, armless, and legless.

Our bewilderment is even more pronounced in *Dead Red* (1994), in which the giant screen is filled with a blotchy expanse of red—a sort of monogamous monochrome. Here, we see one body moving persistently and repeatedly over another: is it decent to watch? How explicitly erotic is this? Identifying the body part is tantalizingly denied (an armpit? a knee?) until suddenly, a smile materializes at the center of the image, and we realize we are looking at a skewed, three-quarters closeup of Smith's smooth face and upper chest, completely covered in lipstick. We breathe a sigh of relief, knowing it is safe to look, as Stewart continues to kiss his partner relentlessly. Is he applying the lipstick, or removing it, or is he biting her, the red lipstick mixing indistinguishably with blood? Suddenly it occurs to us that the body on the receiving end is barely moving at all. Could Smith be dead?

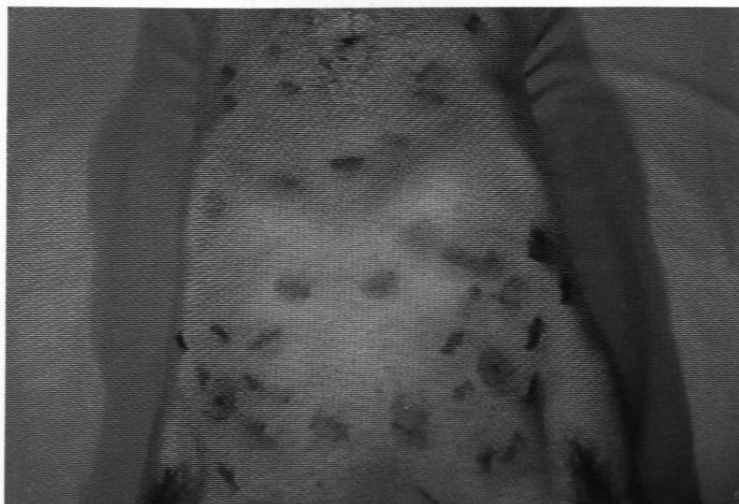


Smith/Stewart's works keep guilty company with crimes of passion, suicide, homicide, even necrophilia; "Murder has its sexual side," goes another of Holzer's deadly truisms.

The other half of *Sustain* begins with a closeup of Stewart's face, underwater, holding his breath. He wears a plastic swimmer's plug which conjures a degrading nose ring with which he might be pulled around, like a work horse or a love slave. Unlike other videos including *Dead Red*, in which the viewer is positioned as a voyeuristic intruder, here we see just what the lover sees. Suddenly, in a panic, he breathes out: the screen fills with bubbles which obscure his face; Smith rushes in, her head covering his as she fills his mouth with precious oxygen. Her head lifts; and Stewart's underwater portrait reappears, like a photo-

DEAD RED, 1994, SCREEN GRAB FROM VIDEO. COURTESY AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, SYDNEY, AND THE ARTISTS.

SUSTAIN (DETAIL), 1995, SCREEN GRAB FROM VIDEO DIPTYCH. COURTESY AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, SYDNEY, AND THE ARTISTS.



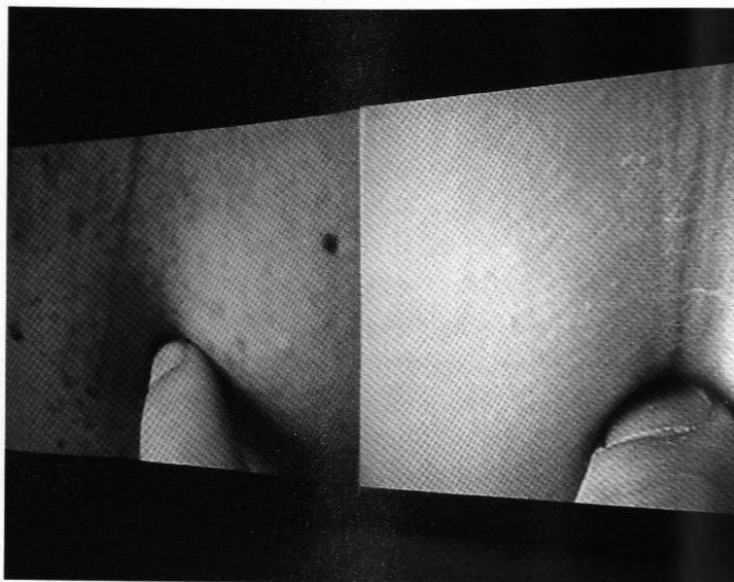
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RIGHT: *FINGER*, 1997, FROM VIDEO DIPTYCH. COURTESY AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, SYDNEY, AND THE ARTISTS.

graph under liquid glass. Stewart holds his breath again until he is made to gasp, and she to save him, over and over in a continuous, 60-minute loop.

Obviously this video is a giant metaphor about dependency, about Stewart's reliance upon Smith for his very survival. But its themes are broader than that, taking in the complicity which develops between a couple, as well as patterns of passivity, perversion, and need. *Sustain*, along with the somewhat similar *Mouth to Mouth* (1995), are, above all, marvelous depictions of a working system, a self-perpetuating, private mechanism which reinforces the roles within a particular relationship, sexual, political, or otherwise.

Pain and danger play even greater roles in other works which push, strangle, or scratch their way into coupledness. In 1997's video diptych *Finger* (a sexually loaded title in itself), a man's and a woman's naked backs fill the screen. Like many of Smith/Stewart's other works, sound is particularly relevant here, as a fingernail is seen and above all heard to scratch out a message—painstakingly, mercilessly—into Stewart's and Smith's flesh. "Please," it finally says; but are these the words of love's



object or its pursuer? In *Breathing Space* (1997) the couple is seen separately, one risking suffocation under a white plastic bag, the other beneath a green one. Here again we see the scene through the lover's eyes, and for this reason we feel safe, knowing that the camera is vigilant, caring. Each lover seems willing to suffer what the other will endure; we watch their relationship being strengthened before our very eyes through a mutually dangerous situation. Plastic bags, like sex, after all, are potentially lethal and should only be toyed with by adults (who, as we know, sometimes suffer miscalculated asphyxiation orgasms like the one we might be witnessing here). Indeed, *Breathing Space* is especially ambiguous; the players look sinister, like henchmen or masked executioners, and yet we know each is merely fulfilling one side of a pact, performing, apparently, out of love.

"Go all out in romance and let the chips fall where they may," goes another one of Holzer's messages. As with these truisms, Stephanie Smith and Edward Stewart simplify great, grand themes, packaging them into bite-sized pieces so as to seduce us into thinking.

GILDA WILLIAMS is an editor and art critic based in London.

MOUTH TO MOUTH, 1995, SCREEN GRAB FROM VIDEO. COURTESY AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, SYDNEY, AND THE ARTISTS.

