

## Art Column

# Art that's looking right back at you

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SUN ART CRITIC

**T**he war on terror has brought with it a new awareness of surveillance of all kinds, from the wall-mounted video cameras that routinely scan airport waiting rooms and train stations to the high-tech reconnaissance satellites that can read a license plate from 150 miles up.

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that contemporary artists have become aware of surveillance photography as a distinct set of formal practices and conventions of visual representation, much as artists of an earlier generation discovered compelling motifs in the ubiquitous commercial imagery of pop culture.

We do not expect surveillance photos to look like Edward Weston landscapes, of course, any more than we expect comic-book superheroes to look like Baroque paintings of saints. Yet comics and paintings can both be art; and, by extension, so, too, can the



A portion of "Application Center/Waiting Room."

grainy, blurry, ambiguous images that issue from the surveillance camera's unblinking eye.

Ann Stoddard's installation *Application Center/Waiting Room*, on view in a superb exhibition at School 33, asks us to consider surveillance photography as both an aesthetic form and as a social practice, as a way of seeing and as an [See Art, 5E]

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# Exhibit at School 33 watches the watchers

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instrument of state power — i.e., the uncomfortable sensation that Big Brother Is Watching You, with all the constraints on individual freedom such knowledge invariably implies.

Stoddard's installation cleverly reverses the normal relationship between artwork and viewer; instead of being passive objects of contemplation, the installation's cameras, computers and video monitors constantly "watch" visitors from the moment they enter the gallery until their departure. Viewers are aware at every moment of being viewed by the artwork.

The use of photography as an tool of surveillance dates well into the 19th century, when photographs were first used by police agencies as a way of keeping track of criminal suspects, and pseudo-scientific typologies of "criminal types" — including the mentally ill and the developmentally disabled — were methodically compiled by academic researchers.

The all-seeing video camera, which can now be miniaturized and concealed inside a space no larger than a button, is merely the latest evolution of a longstanding official fascination with the techniques of social control.

The present war on terror, however, has given those techniques a new urgency while posing new problems for those concerned by the erosion of civil liberties. A totalitarian society is, after all, one which by definition makes no distinction between public and private spheres.

Stoddard's installation re-creates the kind of official no-man's land one might expect to find in some international airport holding room, where people whose names appear on watch lists or those hapless souls whose papers, appearance or country of origin have aroused the authorities' suspicions are taken to be interrogated.

It's a chilling enough scenario on its own — impersonal, devoid of ornament, with the improvised look of temporary expediency (and legitimacy) that soon enough will morph into a permanent state of affairs.

The images produced by the half-dozen cameras that follow viewers around possess none of the formal qualities we admire in, say, a portrait by Avedon or Penn. They are, rather, pure information, an electronic typology composed of an infinite set of physical characteristics that, by implication, turns everyone who appears in surveillance photographs into a potential suspect.

Stoddard's installation refers to this moral transformation only obliquely. One of the video screens displays the sort of nonsensical but invasive questions people singled out by surveil-

**As an artwork, Stoddard's installation challenges us.**

lance might be asked: "Have you ever seen a foreign movie? Do you read foreign newspapers?"

Obviously, there are no "correct" answers to such queries; merely to be asked them is already to be confirmed in one's status as a suspicious person — one who, moreover, under present law may be dealt with quite harshly as a result.

As an artwork, Stoddard's installation challenges us to examine the growing influence of surveillance in American life and perhaps to question the uses to which such power will be put. The question is timely and cogent, and it may make one wish for a response from the public that is equally urgent. That prospect, however, is about the only hopeful note sounded by this otherwise harrowing and somber piece.

Also at School 33 is the gallery's annual juried exhibition, featuring works by Laura Shults, Lesley McTague, Mark A. Miller, Julie Jankowski, Tom Scott, Alex Kondner, Mike Nagrabski and Chuck Sehman.

Both shows run through July 1. The gallery is at 1427 Light St. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Call 410-396-4642 or visit the Web site at [www.school33.org](http://www.school33.org).