

## Bill Jacobson Coming Together and Letting Go

**NEW YORK** Bill Jacobson, a waifish, 39-year-old photographer with a solemn face, stood in front of one of his large, soft-focus black-and-white portraits during a recent studio visit, gesturing ear-nestly as he attempted to sum up his work. "It's about coming together and letting go," he says. "No matter what one's sexual orientation, we all confront the transitory nature of desire, of relationships, and of life itself. Nothing is in a fixed state." Pinned to the walls throughout his spare East Village loft are reproductions of works by artists who inspire him, among them Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Seton Smith, and David Wojnarowicz.

Although Jacobson is a relative newcomer to the gallery scene—he did commercial photography during the 1980s because, he says, he found the art world inaccessible—the

Connecticut-born artist has been well received both critically and commercially, with three solo shows already this year in San Francisco, Portland, Oregon, and London. "Interim Portraits" (1992–93), a series of photos so unfocused and overexposed that they look more like charcoal rubbings, are the most psychologically compelling of his works. Perhaps it is the fragility that emanates from them that gives these portraits of men their mystical effect. The essence of the subject seems compressed within the photographic trace. They are like shadows left by the bombs of Hiroshima, or Pompeian bodies frozen in time.

Intentionally or not, Jacobson's art training (he received his M.F.A.

from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1981) shines through in his photographs, with their allusions to turn-of-the-century Pictorialist photography. But if the psychological intensity of his portraiture is reminiscent of the early Symbolists, the style is different. Traditional notions of the male figure are complicated in his work by issues surrounding gay desire in the age of AIDS.

Jacobson views his series "Interim Couples" (1994) as a portrayal of gay identity in the 1990s. Blurred images of men embracing seem to emerge from the paper like bubbles on the top of a pond, capturing fleeting moments of tenderness and compassion. "I wanted to communicate the demise of the body, and transcendence," Jacobson says. "The diffusion of the image implies dispersion of the physical frame, the bodily shell. Life implies death."



GRIETA OLARINHO/THIR



COURTESY JULIE SAUL GALLERY (2)



Jacobson's luminous photographs, such as *Interim Portrait* #373, left, 1992, and *Songs of Sentient Beings* #1114, 1994, are so unfocused and overexposed that they look more like charcoal rubbings.

Jacobson's most recent works, an ongoing series titled "Songs of Sentient Beings," are his most painterly to date. "When I was a kid I got a minus in drawing," he says. "But I always admired the kids who could make them. Especially charcoal drawings." The phrase "writing with light," coined in the mid-1800s to characterize photography, aptly describes the look of these works. In *Songs of Sentient Beings* #1114, the white T-shirt of the seated figure radiates luminously; the rest of the photo appears partially erased. Jacobson sacrifices detail to hazy, silhouetted areas and charcoal effects.

"My photos usually trigger an emotional response. I believe their faded quality is a reflection of how the mind works—struggling to hold onto memories as they dim." Jacobson says. As such, these frail, ephemeral photographs act to preserve memory, to endure as ghostly commemorations of distant loved ones.

ANASTASIA AUKEMAN