

METROGUIDE

Santa Cruz County's Guide to Movies, Music, Art, Theater, Television, Events Edited by Michael S. Garr

Angels and Punks

The Pope Gallery looks to heaven, while photographer Jana Marcus documents the Manhattan's punk demimonde

Guardians, Spirits and Messengers: The Angel in Contemporary Art runs through Dec. 31 at the Pope Gallery, 125 Walnut Ave., Santa Cruz (427-9780).
Midnight in Manhattan: A Decade of Subcultures and the Alternative Scene, photographs by Jana Marcus, shows through Dec. 31 at the Casa Nova Cafe, 927 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz (426-2233).



After Dark: Nightclubbing in the '80s by Jana Marcus

Village People

Jana Marcus documents the disaffected '80s

THOUGH MOST of the underground-types in Jana Marcus' *Midnight in Manhattan* photography exhibit were probably my age—some maybe older—at the moment of their capture, I still felt painfully old and somewhat detached as I viewed the show.

Marcus' photographs document the subculture of Manhattan's East Village in its after-hours clubs throughout the 1980s and into the '90s. Most of the people in the exhibit are young, showy and highly self-aware. Women dressed in fish-net stockings and vinyl boots. Kids with torn anarchy T-shirts and mohawks. A bleeding moshers wearing a surreal, beatific grin.

Marcus, who maintains an adoration of the alternative-club scene, presents here purely spontaneous moments in the night life of the East Village. Slammers at the Peppermint Lounge are caught in amusingly active efforts at charging into other bodies. A beaming grandpa, shaking a painted maraca, dances joyfully with a leather-jacketed motorcycle chick. A tragicomic, cross-dressing "Mama" sips his drink through exaggerated red lips at the Pyramid Club.

Some of the more beautiful shots are sedate—renditions, for example, of the Danceteria video room where eerily glowing televisions set off a soft, antique focus and grain. A portrait of two black men at *Save the Robots* is a dramatic play of light and shadow on subjects who radiate a proud and dignified beauty, dressed in traditional kilts and biker boots.

Doing this exhibit is like hitting a club and checking the scene. It's a very real examination of the club world, shot with a profound respect for and fascination with its subject matter.

WHETHER MARCUS' fascination with '80s youth will equal that of local exhibit goers is another question. Where Marcus falters in her presentation of this exhibit is in her posted introductory essay, which conveys a heavy sense of import to her chosen obsession. The 1990s, Marcus claims, was a "time of adventurousness and recklessness" in the face of "AIDS, the destruction of the planet and the threat of nuclear war. ... Image was everything. You were as cool as you looked."

Youthful rebellion has its rightful cool-cultivating, culturally expanding and self-discovering place. But rebellious youth culture happens all the time—it's happening now in much the same fashion as in this exhibit. The problem here is that youth culture in the 1980s *wasn't really that special*. I know. The '80s was the decade of my youth. The late '60s had already introduced massive youth political rebellion, and the '70s had ushered in gender-bending, dramatic fashions, heavy metal, punk rock and clubbing. The '80s just didn't have much of its own personality—if anything it extended ideas from past, more imaginative decades.

And though Marcus cites AIDS, Reaganomics and the threat of nuclear war as a gloomy cultural backdrop that fueled the "rebellion" she's captured, I don't recall that those things were much in any young person's mind that I knew in the '80s. Sex, clothes and making a lot of money some day—that was it.

The problem with the '80s was that youth rebellion was mostly for the sake of rebellion itself; it didn't come with a lot of high ide-

als. The threat of nuclear war had been with us for some decades. If kids in the '80s thought about it, it certainly wasn't with the same intensity that kids in the '50s thought about it as they dove under their desks during duck-and-cover air-raid drills.

Perhaps the youth of Manhattan had more a sense of world events than my friends in Miami. But these photos don't show it. They show a wide variety of cool kids and posers, rockers and transvestites, captured with great skill and tolerance. They do document an era. But they don't show anything we haven't seen before.

Marcus asserts in her rambling press release that '80s youth was about living fast and dying young—a permanent affliction. I would argue, of the young set. She claims it was a decade in which "wild fashion statements" pervaded the club scene. Yet her photos, in their attempts to portray the diversity of the East Village scene, lack a disciplined focus on fashion, political issues, youth alienation or anything else.

As a simple documentation of the '80s East Village nightclub scene, *Midnight in Manhattan* is a well-executed, sometimes beautiful exhibit. But as an important, socially relevant photodocumentary, it suffers from its own diffusion and a subject that fails to inspire.

The photo subject I resonated most with in the exhibit was a solitary, unadorned woman sitting alone, bored and exasperated, in the midst of a bevy of teenage girls with nose rings and attitude. Although it's all somewhat interesting to look at, like her, I think I'd rather be somewhere else.

AMI CHEN MILLS