

Thy Brother, Thy Self

PFA's 'Twin Visions' features the homoerotic work of twin video directors Robert and Donald Kinney.

BY DENNIS HARVEY

Twins have always held a position of fascination and exploitation in popular culture. From the earliest manifestations through David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*, twins have been viewed as gifted/cursed with a sort of telepathic (and sometimes colorfully pathological) split soul, with a secret language between themselves that we long to understand. It's the allure of separating the man or woman in the mirror from one's own consciousness and allowing a dialogue — the impossibility of perspective on one's own self made real.

But we've succumbed so thoroughly to the media's titillating, slightly menacing (remember all those thrillers where the 'good' and 'bad' twin turn out to be one schizophrenic whole) portrait that whatever life is actually like for twins is probably now too muddled by intellectual fantasy to understand.

There's no denying that the biological imperative makes San Diego-based video artists Robert and Donald Kinney's work considerably more absorbing and multi-leveled than it might be otherwise. Identical twins in their mid-20s, both gay, they make works with an intriguing political and aesthetic agenda that would be impressive under any circumstances. But the fact that they are twins — and, whether deliberately or out of unconscious necessity, do nearly everything they can to tweak all our most tabloid-bizarro notions about twinhood — lends their efforts a provocative all-questions-left-open nature that blurs all lines between personal and fictive obsession, between 'life' and 'art.' Pirandello played reality-illusion games with time, space and craft; the Kinneys luxuriate in the same game played with their own physical selves.

The "Twin Visions" program at the Pacific Film Archive tomorrow night is a fascinating exercise in exposure and artifice, with the lines between the two thoroughly muddy. While the Kinneys' work in these two co-directed tapes is polished and complex enough in its external motifs — which range



The Kinney twins in *The Maids*

from gender play and ACT-up-oriented politicism to homage/parody of various film-genre/literary styles — its internal psychological landscape of twinned sensuality/bonding/self offers an endless Chinese-box dimension of puzzling, sometimes prurient interest.

The hour-long *The Maids* is a truncated version of the notorious play by Jean Genet — truly an artist for our times, with his sense of rarefied yet blunt homo-exoticism always proffered with an outraged status quo in mind. The play is a poetical rumination on power, domination/submission and ruling/outcast-caste identity as enacted by two French servant girls who plot the death of their mistress.

The Kinneys remove the scenes in which the "Madame" actually makes an appearance to concentrate on the role-playing games and barely sublimated erotic violence between maids Solange and Clare — played by the two brothers/directors in appropriate dresses but without any further drag. Their Lance Loud-like amusing semi-amateur camping is alternately hilarious and tedious, the brightly colored shooting sometimes staccato and sometimes wittily melodramatic in a satire of both Sirkin

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50s melodrama and the more obscure hotflower language of art-cinema.

Genet went on record as saying at one point that he preferred his play to be performed by adolescent boys than by the officially designated mature women; the Kinneys straddle all contextual levels with their interchangeable presence as skinnily femme-posturing boy-adults enacting some ritual of the psychosexual danger zone in fetching slips and garish plastic-flower dominated

framing. When one of them says "Let the insults unfurl, let them rain on me," the effect is a kind of super-camp where, disturbingly, one laughs without knowing quite where the joke begins or ends — it's like *The Women* as a vanity project seen through a cryptically exposing funhouse mirror. Adding to the multileveled strange fun is an intercut of perfect Amerikan Blonde Linda Evans in a hair product commercial — apparently the much-awaited "Madame" here — lending yet another parameter of pop-culture commentary.

The half-hour *Stephen* is a somewhat more direct statement of the Kinneys' provocations. Here, a lover relationship between the twins (incest being another pop-cultural fascination point in twinhood, going back probably well before Thomas Mann) as otherwise undefined roommates gradually explodes onto a larger societal canvas. Their silly, intimate rapport and shared activities (cruising public bathrooms, hanging out in the kitsch-wonderland of their apartment) are tested by a jealousy-provoking relationship with a neighbor.

This onion-skinned narrative, which is initially interrupted by the

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pop jazz of childhood home movies and *Jetsons* clips, finally evolves toward an unresolvably complicated sketch of AIDS terror and empathy. The stance here is resolutely sex-positive — "I have had the most incredible evening. I don't know which is more tired, my knees or my butt" sighs one brother early on — and implicitly, angrily incriminating of U.S. homo/disease-phobia.

Both of these videos are sharp, distinctive, intellectually charged and aesthetically intriguing. They invite our inherent voyeurism only to throw it back in our faces, with an interesting twist or two. It's a pity the PFA didn't also program *The Silence That Silences*, a video (included on the preview tape) that offers an initially hypercorrect but eventually invigorating, funny and painful critique of the media's AIDS portrayal to date.

The Kinneys are transfixed self-willed icons for a new gay artistic/philosophic confrontational policy, in which our conflicting latent desires for visibility and absorption within the greater society are juxtaposed and melded. The mix is uneasy. But then, *Twin Peaks* made it onto prime time — at least for a while. Perhaps the flamboyantly strange flourishes in times of the most institutionalized conservatism. One can only hope the Kinneys' unrepentant homoerotic vid/text readings pry doors open toward a new era where the norm is up for grabs and twinhood is no longer taken as a bizarre Hollywood melodrama, but as a biologically lucky key to the lexicon of ourselves.

The "Twin Visions" program featuring *The Maids* and *Stephen* plays tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. at the Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Ave. in Berkeley. Call 642-5041 for more info.