

Outlandish tribe

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We wouldn't necessarily want to meet these "kids," even on Main Street in plain daylight. We suspect the two young Parisian men, each holding a bat, are not on their way to a little league game. The formally posed dude with hair that looks like a tarantula and a chunk of steel sewn on to one shoulder is not an honour student at convocation.

The guys and dolls depicted in a stunning series of photos by Ralf Marsault and the late Heimo Müller — on view at M du B, F, H & G, with most of the images published in a book called *Fin de Siècle* — live in London, Paris and Berlin, but not in the areas presented in travel brochures. Rather, these children of poverty live in places untouched by middle-class niceties — places where kids don't aspire to jobs, or where parents don't whisk them off to tap-dance lessons or tennis camp.

Many of them don't have lifespans long enough to make it to graduation in even the most accelerated fashion college. Yet high-fashion, even when it borrows from low life, couldn't hold a candle to the home-made leather "armour" and super-frill dresses of these backstreet centuries and queens.

These days, it seems fashion in general has an affinity for violence. The models marching along the average runway try hard to look as though they were on the warpath, more than ready to walk all over you. However, as suggested by Marsault's and Müller's album, it takes anger of a kind rarely expressed in "polite" society to produce clothes that kill — figuratively and literally.

The photos are the result of an 8-year collaborative effort focusing on the "under-class." Marsault and Müller met in 1977 and soon became an artistic "unit." They took the name 25/34, referring to their respective ages at a given time. The project involving fringe elements began in 1987 and ended up producing about 250 works.

It's no surprise to learn that many of the subjects just said yes to drugs early in their lives. But it's equally easy to imagine that their natural response to art would be a colossal "No" — though they themselves are art-objects of sorts. On forays into their chosen European cities, the photographers sought out their exotic human specimens, spotting real over-the-line knockouts and asking them to pose. (That these denizens of the urban wild are not mere weekend punks is asserted in the literature included in the press package accompanying the show.)

Even the satanic likes of Rab of London, two lovingly cultivated spikes of hair sticking from his head and negativity written all over his tattooed body, agreed to be photographed. Some, such as Pop-Eye of Berlin who posed proudly next to some of his favourite gas-masks, seem almost media-wise.

The over-all impression is of a man's world. It's a place where power isn't something concealed in a bank book but is plainly advertised, in facial expression and hardness of muscle.

However, women do have a role that, in its way, is highly liberated, if being



Julien, Jeff, Paris 1986.

as mean as men is a definition of empowerment. Meet Armelle of Paris, for example. The ultimate spice-girl, tough as nails with an attitude matched perfectly to her custom-made leather jacket and metal insets, she stands defiantly in front of wide stairs leading to nowhere, at least not in this picture.

This beautiful and touching portrait, captivating but not invasive, is reminiscent of the work of Brassai — some images also bring to mind photographer Augusto Sander. This work relies on the power of its subject as well as on the prowess of the photographers.

For an alternate version of domestic bliss we encounter Cindy Hugh of London. Truly glorious in her vast, gossamer aureole of pale hair, strands wafting down below her minute waist, she positively steals the picture. A folk-art masterpiece in her own right, this self-made "update" on Barbie, shoe-horned into her plastic "party" dress, has charm to burn. The intricate, crocheted petticoat peeking out from under the dress adds just the right note.

But Cindy is not altogether alone. Standing behind her — in the distance — is a man, probably not an average hubby home from a hard day at the office.



Armelle, Paris 1986.

Still, the surly turn of his shirtless torso, propped against a scabrous brick wall, tells us in no uncertain terms that he is king of his crumbling castle.

The people emerging from the chiaroscuro of these stunning pictures are inevitably posed in frightening industrial wastelands suggesting the end of the world. We get a sense that the subjects, no matter how short-lived and unhealthy are, in fact, desert blooms, rising out of dust and ruin.

Occasionally, the show veers into smoother, somewhat artificial turf, at least in terms of sensibility and tone. If we didn't know the subjects had been asked to pose, we would think — almost — that the photographers had snuck up on Jason of London. In this stunning portrait, somewhere between lovely and slick and printed especially large, we find Jason squatting in the dirt. His averted face is tucked into the shadows. He appears to meditate, possibly on the brevity of existence, his finger moodily poised on the top of a tiny gyroscope, symbol of harmony.

In fact, everything in this picture is momentarily, miraculously, in place. The striations in Jason's monumental Mohawk hairdo are visually echoed in the myriad metal studs on the sitter's arms. Even the zippers and frayed spots on the jeans get in on this elegant, visual minuet of pattern, texture and precision.

This show, a kind of "wildlife safari," takes us into precincts otherwise forbidden. We, of course, are cast as voyeurs ensconced safely in our bus. Yet it is through getting on board as voyeurs that we occasionally learn a little about others. Photography is the voyeur's art par excellence. But these fascinating photos are in no way patronizing. The subjects are not delivered to us bottled as clichés. We have no doubt that after doing their poses, Rab, Cindy Bam Bam and the others were set "free" to fight and sleep in their crumbling, unnatural habitats.

Finally, though, it's hard to come up with a clear answer as to the point of this show, admittedly not meant as a study or a celebration of stance and circumstance. No particular moral is attached, nor do we come to love these people, to discover the heart of gold beating beneath the studs — though we do detect something heating or being beaten.

Whatever its point, however, the show is a must. There is an implicit message in it that this parallel world — at least in terms of the clothes worn — heartily rejects commercialism and the rule of brand names. The other implied message has to do with the ability of humanity to survive, no matter in how debased a state. Sheathed in their self-made clothes, the oddly original folk-hero-nihilists depicted by Marsault and Müller wouldn't be caught dead wearing a macho-jacket by Hilfiger, even if they could afford — or steal — it. And one thing seems clear: anger and poverty are a potent combo in the primordial human will to dress up. We can also conclude that a few strands of well-positioned hair are worth 1,000 words.

+ 25/34 Photographs, at M du B, F, H & G, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 512, until July 31. Call 869-1969.