

The LowDown On High Art

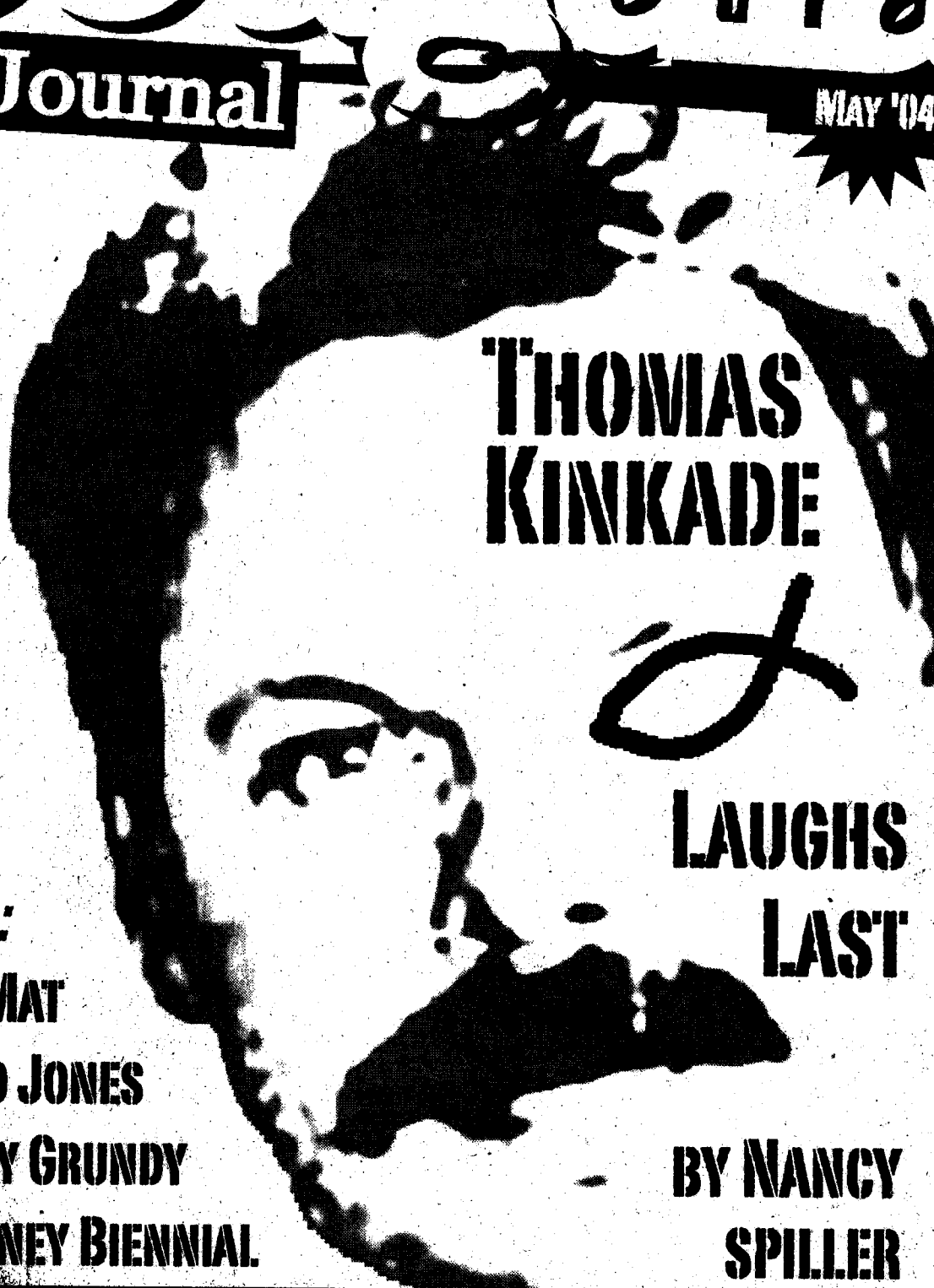
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**THOMAS
KINKADEE**

**LAUGHS
LAST**

PLUS:

ASK MAT

BAIRD JONES

BODDY GRUNDY

WILTNEY BIENNIAL

**BY NANCY
SPILLER**

Cover Story

THOMAS KINKADE LAUGHS LAST

The Thomas Kinkade candy-colored-cottage and garden-covered-lamp in a bedroom Jeffrey Vallance created for the California State University Fullerton show *Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth*, made me think of Bill Viola. It was a fight or flight, self preservation thing, like holding garlic up to a vampire. In Viola's bedroom installation the light blacked out and a woman's agonized face appeared on a dresser-top lamp. Viola's bedroom jolted me awake; Kinkade's wanted me asleep—an eyes-spinning-in-the-head REM slumber, a 24-7 somnambulistic interlude encouraged by the kind of fundamentalist Christian religion Kinkade's art celebrates.

The idea of a Kinkade exhibit curated by contemporary art prankster Jeffrey Vallance had me salivating. This is the man who brought us *Blinky the Chicken*, who has a special relationship with the King of

BY NANCY SPILLER

Tonga. What could be more fun? I did my homework, read the essays by Vallance and other art world types arguing for the legitimacy, relevancy, the *due due* Kinkade, whom we are told repeatedly (in good Barnum fashion) is the world's most successful artist. Kinkade's in 10 million, or 1 of 20 American homes. As the Wal-Mart of painters, they seemed to say, he deserves our embrace, or at least our consideration.

Granted, maybe the essays lacked the cheeky humor and top notch contemporary art-think I admire in Vallance. Perhaps this was because Kinkade is participating fully with the show. His corporation's publishing wing even helped underwrite the handsome, glossy catalog's publication. It was the promise of having my photo taken in front of a 16 foot blowup of a Kinkade painting that kept me going. Actions here, would speak louder than words.

The first *wink-wink-nudge* came front and center at the base of the Christmas tree hung in Kinkadalia. Amidst the piles of Kinkade giftables, sludge from what writer Susan Orlean terms Kinkade's "branded distribution channel" was a *Fine Art Cleaning System*, sporting the *Thomas Kinkade*,

Painter of Light™ logo. As if Kinkade's entire oeuvre weren't a fine art cleaning system, this kit offers Kinkade's millions of collectors a "fine art polishing cloth," a retractable ostrich feather duster, as well as a corner dust brush. Lacking only a roll of toilet paper, was the kit Kinkade's final solution for what he considers the outhouse of contemporary art?

While a harpist played near a display of the Kinkade library—everything from wallcovering and fabric sample books to such Kinkade penned inspirational titles as *Light Posts for Living*; *The Fine Art of Choosing a Joyful Life*, I avoided the temptation to rest awhile in the Kinkade fabric covered Barcalounger, next to the fake fireplace with the lighted, crackling log, and pressed onward to the display of Kinkade-designed tract of homes in Vallejo, California. They're cute, but not as cute as the Kinkade painting cottages that inspired them. That would be financial suicide. These are multi-storied, boxy and gardenless, set in a blank landscape, just like new homes everywhere.

Kinkade's love of the medium is evident in his painterly plein air works, all of which could hang proudly in a gallery in Carmel, the Hamptons or Laguna Beach. But it's his love of *The Message* found in the obsessively detailed and unnaturally colored paintings of an unreal world we should all want to escape to that creeps me out. Kinkade's genius is in marketing. He has harnessed 300 original paintings, none of which are any longer available for sale, into reproduction product supporting 350 galleries. This is high octane art for a high fructose corn syrup culture.

If nothing else, the show proves Kitsch is thriving. Why should we who are drowning in it care? The fish will be fine. The opening night audience was split between those amused at the wretched excess and those in awe of the paintings' "amazing light." Living in a neighborhood where mine is probably the 1 of 20 homes without a Thomas Kinkade, I was left wondering if sentimentality were the new cynicism.

Blessed relief from these sober concerns came with the Reverend Ethan Acres'

shuck and jive preacher man performance comparing Kinkade's vision of heaven to "Munchinkinland." In the Kinkade themed chapel at the show's second venue, downtown Santa Ana's Grand Central Art Center, Acres sang *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* in-drag as Dorothy of Oz. This was followed by the performance of a real wedding ceremony that further blurred the lines between sanctification and send-up of the Master of Light™'s work.

After visiting all the environments, I was disappointed not to find the 16-foot painting enlargements. Not even the Painter of Blight who'd set up his kiosk in the plaza across from the gallery could console me.

My seduction came finally, though, at the shelves of Kinkade merchandise displayed like a real gift shop, only none of the coffee mugs, Kinkade cocoa mixes,

KINKADE'S IN 10 MILLION, OR 1 OF 20 AMERICAN HOMES

spice jars or End of A Perfect Day Pocket Watches were for sale. My consumer lust was ignited. I wanted them all the more. Panic ensued when I discovered there was no requisite gift shop at the end of the Perfect Gallery Day. The only Kinkade related item for sale was a show catalog with a cover painting of Christ standing at the open door of a Kinkade cottage, greeting a flock of sheep wandering up the stone path. The second page featured a Kinkade themed Visa card.

Jeffrey Vallance had spoken.

Hands shaking, I grabbed the catalog, panicked that the pile would soon disappear. Somewhere deep within me the lights blacked out and there flashed the image of an agonized art consumer.

I was a convert. I had found Thomas Kinkade and my Heaven on Earth right there in Orange County.