

Face the facts

1999

-Elisabeth Mahoney

Miscellany

Reviews

Art

Face the facts

superNATURAL

Stills Gallery, Edinburgh

★★★★★

Just when you think that there can be nothing left from the seventies to come back to haunt us, up pops photorealism for a spell in the cool lime-light. The fad will be short-lived, no doubt, but it's probably best to prepare yourself for a summer of photorealist love, what with a Chuck Close retrospective opening at the Hayward later this month.

There can be no better preparation than the work of Machiko Edmondson in superNATURAL, her two-person show with Wendy McMurdo. Mimicking fashion photography styles and codes, Edmondson makes large-scale paintings mostly based on images taken from magazines. These images, designed to be quickly drooled over, are transformed through labour-intensive, detailed painting to something else altogether. The ideal becomes creepy, the "natural look" of flawless skin airbrushed and eerie. But Edmondson doesn't airbrush, she painstakingly layers paint to capture perfect skin, the sheen of lip gloss, impossibly well-groomed eyelashes.

Constructions of desire become the stuff of horror in her hands — toothpaste adverts meet the Stepford Wives. Girls, this exhibition will make you love your wrinkles and cherish your blemishes.

Wendy McMurdo's photographs are the perfect part-

ner for these glam airheads. She digitally transforms her portraits of children — two taken at the Royal Museum of Scotland and one at a school — from ordinary snapshots to extraordinary, uncanny images. A girl plays a clarsach, a small Scottish harp, entranced and transported by the music as she does so. The harp, though, has been made invisible, making the image puzzling, funny and fantastical.

Even better are the museum photographs. McMurdo's slightly possessed-looking youngsters upstage the museum exhibits. A girl looks at two bears in a glass case and at two inexplicable reflections of herself; a boy turns his back on a stuffed bird of prey, his unfathomable expression dominating the image. We're shut out of what's happening, unable to unravel the logic and narratives of childhood worlds. Both McMurdo and Edmondson have a singular take on fantasy and reality; seen together their work is a rather magical celebration of faking it in order to tell it like it is.

Elisabeth Mahoney

Paperback

Seriously real rock

Powder

Kevin Sampson

501pp, Jonathan Cape, £9.99

The rock'n'roll novel lends itself to a certain treatment — the documentation of a band's rise to success, in which the writer affects a privileged tell-all point of view, on the road with band and crew. An un-

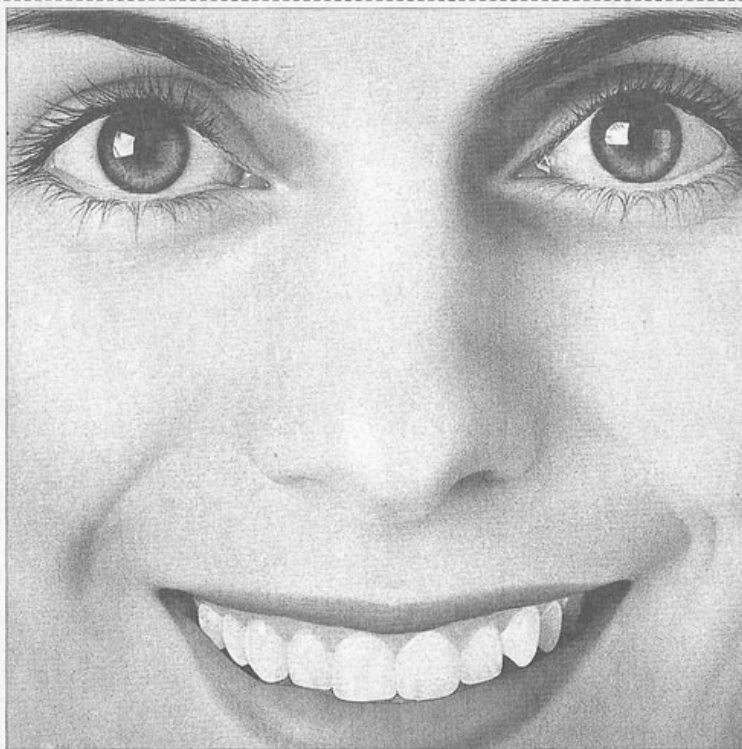
canny sense of destiny permeates these histories of "getting there" and "losing it", with their fantastic, fanatic elements. Kevin Sampson, in his second novel Powder, promises hardcore authenticity.

Powder begins with Sensira, who, alongside the Grams and another Liverpool band, The Purple, make up the new underground music scene. Sensira have just Got Big — Wembley-sized. But they are a hyped sham band, whereas the Grams are the Real Thing. This apparent injustice, along with local rivalry, mean Sensira are the band against which the Grams will chart their success.

The building excitement as the hustling Grams break through, along with plentiful fast-living anecdotes, should ensure that Powder grabs its readers. With little attention to character development or self-analysis, Grams hurtle over a landscape mapped out by generations of rockers before them, falling foul of nymphomania, booze and mind-blowing drugs. There's Keva, the melancholic singer and songwriter; James Love, apeish all-loving druggie guitarist; unmentionable Beano and Snowy; and Wheezer, their asthmatic manager.

Given that Sampson managed The Farm, Powder's tone is in-the-know, with all the right technical details, yet its "exposure" of the rock'n'roll industry reads more as fantasy role-playing.

Beyond a few oblique references to guitar licks infused with genius feedback, the Grams suffer only nominal rock star sensibilities: they go through the steps towards what might be called spiritual



Virtually Everything, 1999, by Machiko Edmondson at the Still Gallery, Edinburgh

advancement: idealisation, realisation, indifference (behaving like a dog), loss of money, disillusionment, seclusion. Keva, taking in the view of London, while mulling on his loneliness, vaguely remarks "Powder". This, followed by an audience screaming, "We want Grams!" makes Powder seem a wild, Terry Southern-style account of modern society engaging enlightenment: what

sex did for Candy, cocaine fixation does for rock'n'roll. Yet Powder at times seems to take the industry too seriously.

With the surprise of success comes the reality of individual expectation. Deciding that the others are taking too much money and not contributing enough, Keva withdraws and wonders if he ought to go it alone, signalling the beginning of the end of a year's triumph

— just as he reaches his thirtieth birthday.

What kind of expression of reality is this — is it good satire, or morally bracing? If Powder lacks insight, perhaps it's due to a cast of characters who don't know what it is to have the road own them. But perhaps slapstick-style fiction — for a laugh, to take the piss — is enough.

Molly McGrann