



WAMPLER'S ART IS HAUNTING: YOU REMEMBER MOM'S TAUNTS AND THE DOG IN THE DOLLARS LONG AFTER YOU'VE DEPARTED. YET HER WORK ISN'T WHINY, IN THAT SLACKER, SEE-WHAT-SOCIETY-MADE-ME-DO MANNER SO COMMON TODAY.

could get into an Ivy League school?" "You said you wanted a hatchback. Why are you wasting time looking at that car? It isn't a hatchback." Because the piece has to do with the artist's actual dealings with her mother, *Jumbo Shrimp* might seem to constitute as much a personal tragedy as public comedy. Wampler says that, when her mother came to the gallery to see the work, "she laughed at parts, which worried me a lot more than if she'd really gotten mad." The gargantuan scale of the video projection, its sweaty color, and the graininess of the piece all contribute to a compellingly enervating effect. *Jumbo Shrimp* is also appended by a little mechanized jack-in-the-box, which is stationed behind the video projector. The puppet pops up, receives mom's harangue, curls up, then springs back for more abuse. This is truly scary.

Wampler's Postmasters show also included a couple of monitor-bound video pieces, which she calls "poor traits." In *Moneypants*, Wampler, playing father, laughs at some kind of whoopee-cushion sounds while a dog—taking the part of Wampler—plays with money on the floor. *Moneypants* is a lite whack at Dad (who's referenced by some hospital-green pants suspended in front of the screen), his wealth, and capitalism in general. *Peach Tree* has Wampler singing in a sari while two Indian musicians play their instruments. The whole thing—not just a particular part—is a portrait of Wampler's boyfriend.

OK, so maybe it's not the weightiest commentary around. But most of what Wampler does errs nicely on the side of art over propaganda. It's also entertaining, in that everyday-grotesque way so popular in today's art world. And Wampler's art is haunting: You remember mom's taunts and the dog in the dollars long after you've departed the gallery. Yet her work isn't whiny, in that slacker, see-what-society-made-me-do manner so common to much art made by members of her generation. It also has a commendable austerity; it feels like most of the extraneous material has been edited out. She makes you feel almost at home while you float in her field of postmodernist contingencies. The (unfortunately false) assumption—which most performance soloists make—that the performer is somehow magnetic the moment she or he steps on the floor or appears on tape isn't all that unreasonable in Wampler's case. She can speak, sing, and dance pretty well. And she's got a nice bod. (Wampler performs some pieces clothed, some nude, and the *unclothed* turns seem less a matter of philosophical necessity than showbiz opportunity. Here, I merely acknowledge her perspicacity in this matter.)

The smallish downside has to do with the nagging sensation that I've seen a lot of Wampler's shticks before: the unresponsive "performing" dog (on *The Ed Sullivan Show*), the tragic accident after a marital argument (any number of B movies), even urinating in public (a guy named Wolfgang Stoerchle did it, from a ladder, decades ago, in LA; doubtless there were precursors). Of course, these cavils flit futilely against my overall reaction to Wampler's work: Quite simply, I like it. But only for a *visit*. I sure wouldn't want to live there. □

Peter Plagens is a contributing editor of *Artforum* and the art critic for *Newsweek*.



Opposite page: **Claude Wampler, *Jumbo Shrimp*, 1998**, mixed-media video installation. This page, top to bottom: **Claude Wampler, *Moneypants*, 1998**, mixed-media video installation. **Claude Wampler, *Peach Tree*, 1998**, mixed-media video installation. All photos: Karl Peterson.