



Chris Scarborough

L I V I N G O N C L O U D N I N E

2007 march 2 through april 4
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn

At first glance the pieces in Chris Scarborough's exhibition *Living on Cloud Nine* appear to be straightforward enough, but upon closer inspection one notices that subtle changes have been made to the subject's appearance, which alters the path of the viewer's response. The subject is generally presented as a closely cropped single figure centrally placed in a neutral location. The artist varies the level of distortion with each individual piece; some changes are more dramatic or disturbing than others. What is most often noticed first is that the eyes are larger and more prominent than normal. The features and bodies are also elongated slightly, which streamlines them while making them seem almost alien. With features that are child-like in nature, the figures take on an air of vulnerability. These modifications also make it difficult to discern traits that normally separate unique individuals from generalized characters. More than simply melding real-life humans with anime characters, Scarborough is doing something far more primal: he is challenging the way we're programmed to respond to these individuals.

The artist's drawing-and-photography two-pronged attack may at first appear unlikely, but the two methods accomplish a common goal. Scarborough takes advantage of the inherent qualities of each practice to maximize his approach. Photography naturally lends a realness and authenticity to the work that the drawings could not so easily provide. Using a variety of software programs, Scarborough painstakingly alters the large format photographs pixel by pixel, to present what appears to be a seamless image. Initially Scarborough's photographs appear to be firmly rooted in the same common



ground as other contemporary photographers like Roe Ethridge, Katy Grannan or Rineke Dijkstra, who use portraiture to present factual representations. However, delicate computer manipulation allows Scarborough to introduce the artist's hand. This aspect allies him with painters like Elizabeth Peyton, who gives her subjects ruby-red lips and elongated features to romanticize and feminize them, or John Currin, whose various elaborations dramatically alter the reading of his figures.

While Scarborough's photographs provide clean realism, his use of graphite on paper provides the seductive materiality and the opportunity for invention that photography lacks. The drawings allow the artist to combine classical, academic influences (Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres or Andrew Wyeth) with the lyrical stylizations of traditional Japanese woodblock prints and contemporary anime. The hand of the artist is deliberately hidden in the photographs, but the evidence of his hand is one of the elements that make the drawings so extraordinary. In the drawing *Untitled (Drift)* one can see both care





and consideration in this delicately executed image. The snow-white paper provides a dramatic contrast for the refined modeling, intricate details, and crisp contours that accumulate to build the exquisitely rendered figure.

Human beings are hard-wired to respond to particular characteristics in certain ways. Our everyday reactions are tied in with our genetic makeup. Scarborough keys in to the viewer's natural attractions and sympathies with his subjects' long limbs, doe-eyes,

button-noses and narrow chins. The work lures us in with its beauty and once there we are left with the uneasy task of analyzing the deformations and following the artist's narrative strings. The viewer is left to navigate the veneer, to distinguish what is authentic and what is embellished, and to question the line between the attractive and the grotesque.

Hamlett Dobbins,
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

