the Stranger

Currently Hanging: Eli Hansen

By Jen Graves

When Eli Hansen switched galleries from Howard House to Lawrimore Project, the event was announced not in a press release on letterhead, but in an ad in the infamous back pages of *The Stranger*.

The ad pictured the scruffy, bearded artist and a frequent collaborator (a character named Herman Beans, shirtless and slouching) sitting on a makeshift platform attached to a concrete wall covered in graffiti. "Available for 'In or Out' Calls," the ad beckoned, licking its rhetorical lips, with the gallery's phone number. The ad was surrounded by pictures of bethonged and bendy ladies: Mia, JayLynn, Savanna, Toni, and Sexxxy Britney, in particular. It wasn't an official work of art by Hansen (the way, say, Lynda Benglis and Jeff Koons have created ads as artworks), but it was an easy extension of the trashy-hetero sensibility that heralded the local arrival of Hansen and his brother, Oscar Tuazon, at Howard House two years ago.

Since then, where Tuazon's work has moved toward a cool and imperious aesthetic—reflecting hippie-village Indianola, Washington (where the brothers grew up), by way of chic-rationalist urban Western Europe, where Tuazon spends most of his time now (in Paris)—the recent creations of Hansen have become both more hardcore and more vulnerable.

The title of the new show at Lawrimore Project is *We Used to Get So High* (also reviewed recently on Artforum.com), and it's the heartbreakingest art show in recent memory in

Seattle. It's sad—Hansen once wrote that he finds himself "chasing his sadness"—and it wants, it wants, it *wants*. It's also grimy and a little dangerous, like a friend your mother insisted was a bad influence.

In the front room are photographs of fetid scenes embedded in cigar boxes, seen under a layer of yellowy resin, like slightly shameful secrets that the artist has decided to share anyway. You insert a finger into a twisted wire to open the boxes, getting yourself entangled, maybe complicit, maybe sympathetic to whatever has happened before in these decaying after-places.

Clear glass vessels mounted on the walls glow like jewels under the gallery's spotlights, but on closer inspection you notice their necks are jagged and broken or they dangle long, ugly plastic hoses that turn them into a combination of beer bongs and hospital equipment. Two sculptural installations look like broken chemistry sets—a cross between high-school innocence and meth cooking—made of glass and concrete and detritus. What are they capable of cooking up? What have they already made? One concrete object sitting forlornly on the floor, shaped like a glass beaker with curls of glass sprouting from its top, is the bleak doppelgänger of the bright, bongy Chihuly Venetians so familiar to audiences in Seattle (and Hansen is a trained glassblower in the Northwest tradition). We used to get so high; this is what's left.

An eerieness hangs over the show, and it's the ghost of a spiritual promise that's failed but refuses to disappear. A handful of highly formal paintings are the most unexpected of the works—big, beautiful chemical chain reactions built out of cut wood panels, painted white and mounted on white walls in an act of camouflage, or painted black and mounted on black walls. It's hard to imagine a better abstract portrait of the addict on the verge of shooting up, all squirreled away somewhere, hidden and hoping to become one with the universe or at least to get off this ground. Russian suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich—creator of the *Black Square*—and "Pope of Dope" William Burroughs had much in common.

Word has it that Seattle Art Museum has one of the major sculptures in the show on hold, as well it should. Hansen is an almost painfully sensitive interpreter not only of his own dirtied soul, but of this place and its creative traditions.