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ANNA CRAYCROFT

The Agency of the Orphan

*Tracy Williams Ltd.
313 West Fourth Street, West Village
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Tired of contemporary conceptual art that recycles ideas from the 1960s? Try Anna Craycroft's brilliant New York solo debut. It's not exceptionally exciting visually; it has a colorless, archival look. But it is uncommonly thought-provoking.

Ms. Craycroft's novel idea has been to explore systematically the question of why so many protagonists of 19th- and 20th-century fiction are orphans. Her show starts with a wraparound display of 295 framed portraits (from the Internet, television, publicity stills and other sources) of orphan heroes from literature, movies and animated cartoons. They include Oliver Twist, Pollyanna, Luke Skywalker and some Japanese anime characters.

Upstairs, in each of a pair of Victorian-style ceramic fountains, water pours like tears from the eyes of a child's downcast face. In another room a set of oversize pencil drawings copied from photographic head shots portrays three orphan types: the Beguiling Orphan, the Piteous Orphan and the Dissident Orphan.

To appreciate all this you have to read the book Ms. Craycroft created to accompany the exhibition. Part semiotic analysis, part Jungian self-help book, it lucidly explains what makes the archetypal orphan (as distinct from real-world orphans) such a compelling symbol for modern people. Basically, orphans combine two opposite sets of traits: they have a plucky and resourceful independence that enables them to triumph over harsh worldly circumstances, but they also personify a state of constant yearning, because they are always searching for the emotional connectedness they lost when they were young.

Sound familiar? If you're not an orphan yourself, you probably know a few. Their number is the price we pay for romantic individualism.

KEN JOHNSON