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ISSUES OF IDENTITY IN ASIAN AMERICAN ART

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Editor's Note

Our identity sets us apart from others. This set of distinctive characteristics defines us both internally—how we see ourselves—and externally—how others see us. While many of these attributes such as race or physical characteristics are unchangeable, they can often be elusive. We may spend our lives attempting to define our identity in a way meaningful to us. In fact, even corporations now search for (and find with the help of image makers) identities. But often it is the artist's journey toward identity we can share. Because through their art forms—writings, photographs, music—we glimpse their inner explorations. With each work, we may see the inevitable distillation of the transformational experiences that have molded these people. The artists, in turn, gloss from this meaningful and manageable composite a firm foundation that can be the basis for art as well as self-image.

In this light, the experiences of artists working within the confines of another culture can be doubly daunting. Artists must identify their defining life experiences within a community that may not share or understand them. Margo Machida addressed the issues of ethnic identity in Asian American art recently and her remarks have been adapted for SPOT in the essay Issues of Identity in Asian American Art. Machida examines the generational differences she has found in artists dealing with ethnic identity issues in their work and discusses the work of four noteworthy artists. Among the artists included are Milton Fuentez, Huhn Pham, Tieng Kwong Chi and Tommie Arri. All artists with the exception of Tieng Kwong Chi appeared in the Houston Center for Photography exhibition "Picturing Asia America" curated by Monica Chua with support from Texas Commission on the Arts. This issue of SPOT also highlights the three Fotofest exhibitions at the George R. Brown Convention Center, November 10-30, 1994. In Transgressive Boundaries, Jo Orell looks at the curatorial dilemma inherent in undertaking an exhibition as expansive as "American Voices" and bearing the subtitle "Latino, Chicano, Hispanic Photography in the United States" might indicate. Also Peter Brown reviews the "Images of the World" exhibition in From the Edge. Brown finds that the environmental lessons lurking in the exhibition are both global and cross-generational. In Fashionable Consumption, Ed Osowski reveals that the ninety years of fashion photographs included in "Fashion: Evolution/Revolution" not only speak to the evolution of cultural history but also the power of our drive to consume.

Karen Gillen Allen
American Voices, Latino/Chicano/Hispanic Photography in the U.S. — one of the 1994 Fotofest exhibitions.

Jo Ortel

Last year, to mark its fifth International Festival of Photography, Fotofest devoted a sizable portion of its resources to presenting contemporary photography by Latino photographers. Among a host of satellite shows celebrating Latin Americans, one particularly noteworthy exhibit, curated by Ben deuevo and on display at Maldonado Consulting, showcased the work of local Hispanics. A far larger and more ambitious exhibit, with over 700 photographs, "American Voices" offered an impressive, and at times overwhelming, survey of photography being made by Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans throughout the United States.

To underscore further the multicultural emphasis of the festivities, Fotofest hosted a symposium entitled "Across Cultures," in which a diverse group of internationally recognized artists, scholars and curators offered their perspectives on creating and using art as a bridge between cultures. The symposium was proudly attended, which was unfortunate, because the presentations served as a useful backdrop to the "American Voices" exhibition. Together, the symposium, the exhibit and the satellite show of local photographers raised a number of concerns about the nature of identity and its relationship to representation, which lie at the center of much current debate.

"American Voices" was the collaborative effort of four U.S. Latinos, Kathy Vargas, Robert Bautista, Charles Baszun Rivera, and Ricardo Vierna. The decision to invite Latinos to curate the exhibition was in itself laudable, particularly at a time when Latinos are regularly challenging the right of exhibiting institutions to control the cultural presentation of their communities.

Together, the curators decided upon a loose over-arching framework that they then divided into three subsections based on photographers' ethnic identities or cultural ties. Vargas and Bautista curated the Mexican American segment, Baszun Rivera the Puerto Rican section, and Viera the Cuban American portion. Each section had a unique flavor and deserves careful attention on the basis of its mix of strengths and weaknesses; however, I would like to explore the difficult but related questions that the exhibition in its entirety prompted.

With "American Voices," the curators sought to bring new visibility to a vital, but little known part of U.S. culture. Further, they hoped to assert and dispel simplistic, stereotyped conceptions of what Latino photography looks or "should" look like, by offering a wide sampling of the rich and diverse photographic practices with which Latinos are currently engaged. The sheer scale of the exhibition ensured that the first objective was realized, and the work that was included encompassed a range of aesthetics, techniques, and subjects, with well-chosen examples of everything from classical portraiture and documentary photography, to video and mixed-media installations.

The show presented many photographers who warrant critical attention; the seductive black-and-white photographs by the Cuban American, Abelardo Morrell, might serve as an example of the most engaging work in the show. In one group of images, Morrell photographed interior scenes onto which he had pasted another image with the aid of a camera obscura. Because it reverses what it "sees," Camo Cibachrome Image of Brookline View in Brady's Room, 1992, depicts a child's bedroom superimposed by an upside-down view of the street outside. Leafy trees and neat, clapboard houses appear in sharp photographic detail on the walls of a quiet space cluttered with an array of toy dinosaurs and a miniature ferris wheel. The room is alive with the unexpected confluence of two worlds: private and public, interior and exterior.

Morrell addresses questions of illusion and perception, fact and imagination in other seemingly straightforward photographs. In one series, Morrell positioned his camera outdoors and photographed the light glancing off thin book illustrations. In Book: Boy with Fruit by Carnagio, 1995, we glimpse only the indistinct, ghostlike image of Carnagio's familiar painting; the figure appears very dark-skinned. The photographs are a study in the physics of light and shifting perspectives, but it also sets the viewer to ponder the larger philosophical and cultural meanings associated with light and illumination, sight and insight. Is Morrell commenting on the "blind spots" of our mainstream, Eurocentric United States? The use of an open book-medium, vehicle and embodiment of Western civilization—and a reproduction of an icon of Western high culture suggest that the artist's concerns range far beyond the photographer's art to include the role of culture in defining and shaping what we are able to perceive, what is visible and invisible to us.

"American Voices" was highly commendable, but like any exhibition, it was not without flaws. A fundamental problem lay in the curators' acceptance of highly contested pre-existing concepts, such as an essentialist notion of ethnic identity, as the basis for their exhibition. Consequently, "American Voices" was vulnerable to some of the very criticisms it sought to eradicate and redress. Where the curators did attempt to redefine the parameters of the debate, their efforts were muted and tentative; as a result, they were largely lost on the show's visitors.

Even as the exhibition attempted to correct misconceptions about Latino photography, it appeared to leave unquestioned other controversial terms. How, for example, should Latino and Hispanic be defined? Who do such labels encompass? As Guillermo Gomez-Pena has written, these terms are loaded with ideological implications: "they create categories and hierarchies that promote political dependence and cultural underestimation." In the absence of more enlightened terminology, he writes, we have no choice but to use them with extreme care.

In fact, that absence points out the linguistic and, by extension, cultural conceptual biases and prejudices that many are struggling to change. We have an overabundance of words that we use to name Others, but most of these labels blur distinctions between specific groups; we lack the terminology that would particularize in a satisfying way the diversity of Others—not to mention the diversity and complexity of relationships to more than one culture that individuals routinely juggle.

Given these circumstances, Gomez-Pena is right to insist that we use pre-existing terms with the utmost care. Unfortunately, the curators of the Fotofest exhibition did not always follow this sage advice. Their choice of title, "American Voices," was very effective; it implicitly challenged unspoken assumptions that light-skinned, European-descended people living in the United States are somehow "true Americans." Further, it drew attention to our linguistic chauvinism, which seldom acknowledges the hemispheric dimensions of America, the simple truth that America does not in fact stop at the U.S. borders.

But the subtitle the curators settled upon, "Latino/Chicano/Hispanic Photography as an Art," perpetuated the inexact and disturbing usage of terms that Gomez-Pena (and others) have found troubling. The option seemed to suggest that the show would encompass work by photographers with cultural connections to all of the more than twenty-seven Latino American countries; in fact,
only artists with ties to the three oldest and largest Spanish-speaking cultures in the United States—
Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American—were represented.

Although some of the work included in "American Voices" raised questions about precisely these matters of identity (Laura Aguilar’s multimedia three-part installation "How Mexican is Mexican?" 1991, was perhaps the most pointed), and although the curators acknowledged the inexactitude of their subtitle during the symposium, nowhere in the exhibition proper was indication given that the terms were provisional. Without question, the slippage or gap between what the title implicitly promised and what the exhibition actually delivered reinforced our North American tendency to confuse and homogenize distinct Latin American cultures. As one Brazilian photographer remarked, the exhibition effectively rendered invisible all those artists with cultural ties to countries not included in the exhibition.

One wished for greater accuracy about precisely what was represented. Better still, the curators might have opted for a subtitle altogether. Of course, this alternative would have had its own limitations. But, as noted scholar Jean Flores asserted when he emphatically refused to define the term Latino, "there’s no way that—especially nowadays—it is possible really to talk in any kind of definitional way about anything, least of all about such a complex issue as the question of identity among such a diverse group of people...because, no matter what you say, somebody will feel excluded or will feel that some aspect is left out."

The same problem of exclusion plagued the format in which the curators chose to employ "American Voices." In a survey, a part is meant to stand in for, or represent, the whole. Clearly, this means that someone will have to make selections based on their perceptions of "the whole," and that some will inevitably be excluded from the final presentation, even as it is meant to be representative of the whole. Curators (authors, when the survey takes book form) are held to acknowledge and even less frequently stress that this is an essential component in the fashioning of a survey; more often, the significance and process of selection is minimized with an evasive comment about obvious choices, or with false assurances of comprehensiveness and "truthful" representation. The obliteration may be unintentional: utmost precision might indeed be taken to insure that works will be chosen with regard for a perceived sense of truthfulness in representation. But what about the unacknowledged, unconscious biases that result from cultural conditioning—from education and training, for example, or from class-based and regional traditions? Invisible, potentially harmful problems arise when a perspective or opinion is mistaken for or recommended as Truth.

Certainly there is no reason to doubt the sincerity and integrity of the curators’ selections for the "American Voices" exhibition. But some visitors criticized the show for being too conservative, others complained that traditional documentary photography was over-represented, imparting the "wrong" impression about the state of contemporary Latino photography. The form of the exhibition undermined the intent of the curators to dispel simplistic stereotypes about Latino photography. The show ultimately reproduced the structure that led to the exclusion of Latinos and other groups in the first place. With no guidance to help them think and look in a new way, viewers were left to sort out the overwhelming number of images with whatever (lack of) knowledge they might possess about Latino or Hispanic art.

This assessment might have been averted had the curators focused on a specific field of opportunity rather than trying to provide a representative survey of the photography of entire cultures or ethnic identities. In fact, the organizers had hoped to provide re-assessment of commonly-held assumptions about the cultural identity and authenticity, by emphasizing bi-culturalism and multi-culturalism. The subtitle in full is "Latino/Chicano Hispanic Photography in the U.S.T", after all. "American Voices" was not simply about ethnic origins, nor was it exclusively about immigration. It was about both of these issues—and much more. The show sought to "speak" through photography to issues of cultural origin, historical, immigration, and the experience of working between cultures. The exhibition, it was hoped, would illuminate the complex nature of the relationships that exist between and among cultures, as physical, spiritual, and cultural borders are traversed and crossed, crossed and re-crossed.

Among other things, the curators wanted to highlight the great variety of bi-cultural or intercultural experiences that are negotiated by ever-increasing numbers of individuals. The photographs included within the Cuban American section, for example, represented different periods of migration and settlement, as well as a host of diverse memories and political views of the exile brought on by the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Other national histories affect individual histories and relationships to two or more cultures.

Re-conceiving cultural and ethnic identity as a fluid, continual process rather than as a fixed, unchanging entity or a race that is self-considered and self-selected is also a part of the exhibition. "American Voices" could bring this line of thinking to the fore for the viewer who saw the exhibition but did not attend the accompanying symposium. One could only speculate how Victor Vasquez or Arturo Doehring, for example, positioned themselves culturally, where they reside emotionally, intellectually, physically (and for how long). The press release designating geographical places of residence (Vasquez: Puerto Rico; Cuenca: New York, NY), but it did not detail the length of residence or other intangibles.

M. Theresa Hernandez, Mother's Day '94
Deidah Montoya, God's Gift, 1993
Moreover, the photographers' works were grouped and according to their ties to Mexican American, Puerto Rican or Cuban American communities. The Mexican American section was at the front of the hall, the Cuban American portion at the back, and the Puerto Rican section was sandwiched between the two. Within this layout, and without information about the specific con-
temporary photographer to his or her respective Lat-
in America country, the exhibition tended to bolster rather than challenge the view that ethnic identity is monolithic, imperious to change. I was disappointed that the physical arrangement of the exhibition was not utilized more creatively to underscore in a symbolic way for the viewer the notion of trans-
gression and blending of two or more cultures. As it was, the maze-like organization of the exhibition space, and the blurred distinction between each of the three subsections was confusing and frustrating. If the idea of border-crossings had been developed and accentuated, the experience of the exhibition with its overlapping and merging segments could have served as a rough photobarometer to what Gloria Anzaldúa has so
typically characterized the experience of living on both sides and in the margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity."

With its much more intimate scale, the satellite show of local Houston Hispanic photographers at Maldonado Consulting avoided the problems that haunted the FotoFest exhibition, although the included works spanned an equally wide range of aesthetics and subjects. In a talk presented at the FotoFest symposium, Dr. Tatcho Mindiola, director of the Mexican American Studies Program at the University of Houston, visited that Houston has not yet witnessed an indigenous proliferation of visual art and literature by Latinos that cities such as San Antonio and Los Angeles boast. Though somewhat uneven, the show at Maldonado Consulting suggested to me that the problem does not lie in some unspecified lack of talent among Houstonians; rather, it is a matter of fostering and nurturing those in our midst, and providing them with the necessary resources and support. For me, the emotionally complex, gritty black-and-white photographs by María-
Theress Hernández, Untitled (Mother's Day), Rosenberg, the startling image by Eduardo Munto of a monkey peering out from a cage, and the stark interviews by Juan García from his Grandmother Series were as compelling and evoca-
tive as many of the photographs in "American Voices."

If others registered the same excited response that I did to individual work and photographers included in these
two exhibits, a wide-ranging and lively dialogue about contemporary Latino photography will soon follow. As it travels across the country and is seen by different audiences, "American Voices" (together with the forthcoming catalo-
"gue) will undoubtedly stimulate more discussion about presentation, and more substantive critical analysis of Latino photography. When both of these happen, it can only be beneficial — for Houston as the nation, for con-
temporary photography in general and for Latino photography in particular.

Jo Ortl received a Ph.D. at Stanford University and is currently writing a book about the contem-
porary artist Niki de Saint Phalle.

FOOTNOTES
1. The symposium was held on November 11-13, 1994, Houston Rican scholar and professor Juan Flores, heartbroken after his own family's losses, read the keynote address he had written for his dying uncle. villars
2. "American Voices is scheduled to travel to desti-
pinations as yet unknown at press time. The published catalogue will include essays by the curators, as well as by noted scholars and historians.

3. Interested press release announcing the exhibition.

4. According to Ricardo Villar, the photographer has called these works "meeting points for fact and in-
agination."

5. Galo Marcelo Gómez-Peña, "Border Culture: The Multi-Border Paradigm," in the catalogue to the "The Deco-


7. Opening remarks of Flores' excellent talk pre-
sented at the symposium, "Cross-Cultures," sponsored by Ruchell. A version of this talk will be included in the forthcoming exhibition catalogue "American Voices."


9. Ricardo Villar, in a presentation at the Houston symposium.

10. Also included, pertinent to Jean-Pierre d'elloumis,
the New Museum, San Francisco, Austin, La-
books, 1986. In the show, the primary focus was on the exchange among the artists who live in the studio space, and "American Voices" is one of the shows that have made "border crossings" between the three Latin American countries. Still, even this exchange, the analogy might have been superficially exploited. And, in neither the catalogue nor the photographic portfolio, which is included in the exhibition embodied mul-
tiple exchanges, intercultural connections.

11. Mindiola was speaking in particular of Mexican American. He talk offered an overview, if augmen-
ted, history of Latino heritage and experience in Houston.

Author's Note
Special thanks are due to Alan Carroll for his insightful comments, helpful suggestions, and
enduring patience while I worked to clarify my thoughts on the "American Voices" exhibition.
The approximately 220 photographs included in "Images of the World" section of the "Global Environment" do all of this. As good as the work generally is, the overall show seems more as an environmental point, an index of hover who are acquainted with but need to be reminded of, than as the definitive show on the environment. That exhibition would fill the convention center and spill out the doors. But the work (twenty small and related shows on 3.5 hours-long environmental problems still) has the desired cumulative effect. One exits the center square, eyes, checking the Houston landscape ever more as familiar for signs of social justice, uniting the air — immediately confronted with inner city issues (homelessness and decaying housing) on three sides of the convention center, while on the other, the skyscrapers, memorials to old demolished Houston shine down like Pandoras. Thoughts spin to refiners, to ground water, to a burning San Jacinto River, to the embattled coastal plain, to local issues that relate to the global problems represented by the show. And one tries unsuccessfully to keep them at some distance.

Each section of the exhibition is worthy of consideration and of searching out the book or larger show that would represent it expansion. Most of them, appropriately, are quiet calls to arms. "Images of the World" as whole is heartfelt, committed, shadowed, multi-dimensional, and finally unresolved, as it must be. Some of the problems presented have workable solutions. In some the outcome is in doubt, others are tragedies out of which lessons must be learned, units simply to be built upon. The exhibition poses questions for which there are no easy answers and is also, finally, quite moving. One bounces back and forth, angry, sad, depressed, filled suddenly with a hope inherent in the simple resilience of people, land, and time.

And one is filled also with a profound admiration for the photographers who have done and continue to do this difficult, often dangerous, sometimes wonderful work. It is not appreciated or rewarded in society. It should be said that most of these photographs are born of pain, outrage, and the need to show truths that otherwise would not be understood. They are considered and thoughtful crises to see, to think, and to act.

For the most part, the show consists of straight photographs. They are sequenced and sectioned in imaginatively narrative ways and in the sense leads from crisis to crisis, we make the connections, we see the correspondences and check off the historical references. It should be noted that many of these photographs also act in a key, fashion, tapping into our memories of similar imagery encountered in the past: still photographs, TV films, and the like, a fact which tends to give the show a depth that's plucked from cultural consciousness. This is generally a given, but one that I think comes through particularly strongly in a show with this amount of social content.

Familiar words restate as well: Superfund, Chernobyl, endangered, rain forests, Hiroshima, toxic, cold war, nuclear, overcrowding, cancer. And as they pop up, so do our everyday.

Hiroshi Tschiida, Hiroshima Collection

Student Uniform, Akio Takada (3 at the time) was engaged in fire prevention work about 300 hours from the hypocenter. His father found his school uniform hanging on a branch of a tree on August 8, 1945. His body was not found.

Martha Mading titled in 1993
narrative that suddenly takes a nasty turn, surface beauty with very tumbled depth, and more. All seem fair play to me, given the stakes. As before used. Marcos Samoiloff's photographic work in the Southern American is best considered in sequence—and the sequence is seductive: the viewer moves from graceful unpeopled riverscapes and National Geographic style portraits to an environment being stripped—plunge finally wiped out of all except earth. Tracks and mud predominate. In a slide presentation that Samoiloff gave (a before-hand and after set of images that bridged a decade,) he showed what had occurred and he was curiously resolved about it. There was nothing to be done finally but to accept the destruction and literally build on it. Parallels to the American West resound.

Claudia Andujar, who has worked in the Northern Amazon with the Yanomami people for twenty years, showed wistful, fleeting glimpses of these villages, images that express in their form and nature their pain. They are wonderful, filled with strange out-of-focus areas that softly butters their "almost not there" presence. The Yanomami live in an area in which gold mining has taken hold and are threatened by miners, development and disease. One has the feeling that if one blinked, the people in the photographs would be gone. And this seems to be the point.

Marc Riboud's photographs of Angkor Wat are concerned with the forces of nature, and with war. War in this presentation serves to undermine any notions of respect for nature. In Riboud's photographs,Angkor Wat, an ancient temple in Cambodia, takes a few whacks at ancient civilization—points less pressing than others in the show, but certainly worth making nonetheless. Pyrokinesis thefts wriggle around the old stone, skulls pop up, the dramatic shadow of a soldier with a gun looms from a wall. In a way, this is a high point in the show—nature's revenge, and it's unfortunate that Angkor Wat of all places is the recipient of those forces. Scale is important here, in terms of our response: some of the photographs are huge, and we are pulled into the texture and stone right along with the roots.

The endangered species photographed in the studio by Susan Middleton and David Littschwager are anthropomorphized and formalized—a rolly poly Great British bear, a crested coati, a cornucopia mustached sturgeon, a disinterested Wood Bison, snails that have arranged themselves into dew droplets, and Westray Aloe. Middleton and Littschwager make these creatures and plants almost too accessible to us, and in this, its notes are struck. The animals are brought into our world, photographed with Awesomescape white backdrops and are posed in very human ways. We connect with them or are put off, and they become at once art objects, cautionary tales, and quasi-natural history museum pieces—but simultaneously, they are poetic. In their transposition, like rain forest natives coming to plead their case before Congress, they make a strong point.

The EPA Superfund Sites examined by Masumi Hayashi are deceptive in similar ways. They are striking lush, gridded, almost quill-like color landscapes that first appear perfectly normal. Hayashi, in her wall statement talks about a first visit to one of these sites and how taken she was by its beauty; then she immediately wondered what he had missed seeing elsewhere. The question became, how does one photograph the invisible, her response was to grid the surface of the picture into smaller photos (an art world convention) to make the scene as a whole naturally attractive (full scale, ambient light) and then to append informative and very disturbing wall texts describing the poisons that exist beneath the mound or the water or the dirt. We are invited into what seems to be a nice little neighborhood, only to have some sense slapped into our heads. In a small, interrelated room of photographs, Antonim Kratochvil, David H. Wells, and Antrax Garcia Campes talk about the effects of pollution and pesticide in photo essay fashion. Their images range from the central valley of California, to the rain forests of Brazil, to industrially polluted Eastern Europe, to child victims of Chernobyl who were photographed in Cuba. The correspondences among the toxic wastes, the oil lakes, the plumes spraying towns, and the kids from all over being born with birth defects, makes the joining global point. Stylistically the work moves well from image to image, all of the photographers using an Eugenie Smith sort of committed journalism.

Peter Goen and Bob Dawson, co-founders of the Water in the West Project, deal with water—it's use, its scarcity and its politics. They use large format cameras and work within a landscape tradition that dates from O'Sullivan and Morrisey to Adams and Weston to Caponigro and Clift. I guess. And they use it, as do a variety of their generation, to make effect. The photographs are still beautiful. They are balanced and lushly printed, but the content has switched from the untouched West to the embattled West about to go under. Their work functions well in sequence (as presented in the show), as individual image (or diptych)—Goen has two stunning mountain diptychs, although I think they're not. In their transposition, like rain forest natives coming to plead their case before Congress, they make a strong point.

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Peter Goen and Bob Dawson, co-founders of the Water in the West Project, deal with water—it's use, its scarcity and its politics. They use large format cameras and work within a landscape tradition that dates from O'Sullivan and Morrisey to Adams and Weston to Caponigro and Clift. I guess. And they use it, as do a variety of their generation, to make effect. The photographs are still beautiful. They are balanced and lushly printed, but the content has switched from the untouched West to the embattled West about to go under. Their work functions well in sequence (as presented in the show), as individual image (or diptych)—Goen has two stunning mountain diptychs, although I think they're not. In their transposition, like rain forest natives coming to plead their case before Congress, they make a strong point.

The EPA Superfund Sites examined by Masumi Hayashi are deceptive in similar ways. They are striking lush, gridded, almost quill-like color landscapes that first appear perfectly normal. Hayashi, in her wall statement talks about a first visit to one of these sites and how taken she was by its beauty; then she immediately wondered what he had missed seeing elsewhere. The question became, how does one photograph the invisible, her response was to grid the surface of the picture into smaller photos (an art world convention) to make the scene as a whole naturally attractive (full scale, ambient light) and then to append informative and very disturbing wall texts describing the poisons that exist beneath the mound or the water or the dirt. We are invited into what seems to be a nice little neighborhood, only to have some sense slapped into our heads. In a small, interrelated room of photographs, Antonim Kratochvil, David H. Wells, and Antrax Garcia Campes talk about the effects of pollution and pesticide in photo essay fashion. Their images range from the central valley of California, to the rain forests of Brazil, to industrially polluted Eastern Europe, to child victims of Chernobyl who were photographed in Cuba. The correspondences among the toxic wastes, the oil lakes, the plumes spraying towns, and the kids from all over being born with birth defects, makes the joining global point. Stylistically the work moves well from image to image, all of the photographers using an Eugenie Smith sort of committed journalism.
over of South American Old Caracaz, according to these photos (and their texts), no longer exists. It has been torn down, and in the work of Ricardo Gomez-Perez is to be photographed most succinctly from a car. These are like early black-and-white Meyersonettes, or compressed Friedlanders, grabbed bits of order, side-long glances that fall together—as much surrealist takes on urban existence as they are political documents.

In the aesthetic that Barbara Knight (known recently for her photographs of forest animals that have blundered into human environments) brings to the Nevada desert, the work appears as dry as the sage country represented. The work is minimal, concerned with the lay of rocky land and with the inclusion of a sparse variety of bombs, weapons areas and test materials left over from the Cold War. One is pulled in by the severity, scratching at the photographs for meaning. Perhaps the most intensely moving part of English, recounts where the objects were found, who had been wearing them, what had happened to the people during the blast and what had happened to them afterward. The objects are so immediate, so worn and so vulnerable that a breathing person suddenly seems to take shape, warm, innocent and human. The experience is wrenching because these people are mostly children, women and old people. There is tenderness throughout the enterprise, from the thought, to the collection, to the pictures, to the writing. And the writing is simple, just facts—a bomb that the United States might have memorialized on a postage stamp to these people to bits.

The final section of the show deals with large scale multimedia, collaged and/or staged work, the art world’s response to environmental holocaust. Martha Madigan, Ellen Garvens, Ron O’Donnell, and Patrick Nagatani are included. Madigan is represented by a single piece and it is quite a somber beauty: a gridded photograph of leaves and figures with small photos of what one learns (only) from the catalogue are Somali children, their faces peering from beneath the leaves. The colors and graceful in appearance. There is a compacting of material, the politics of which, the show seems oddly understated.

Ron O’Donnell’s blackly humored, ironic work (unfortunately installed immediately following the Hiroshima imagery) Laughs us sit-com style to apocalypse. It also is made up of garbage, this time carefully arranged and photographed in set-up interior spaces, sometimes with mannequin-like people, sometimes not. The work is purposely flip but it somehow stayed with me in its mock, careful perversion. He seems beyond mourning—seeing nothing on the horizon but more garbage. He’s at one in a swirling moment, with a happy mark of cartoon humor firmly belted into place.

Patrick Nagatani, with his rockets and nuclear powered irradiated bats, ends the show. His work too is concerned with the desert and what the U.S. government has done with it. Nests built into the sky, cates sprout rays, Ayres Rock glows as an aboriginal Australian is vaporized, bats zing out of Carlsbad Cavern to possess us, a “nuclear champ” is memorialized. It’s all subtly funny and subtly horrible and finally, given its bellicose subject, interestingly subtle. The scenes he creates must be dealt with over time. The best of his work seems true dreamscape of ominous order—which takes in a lot of ground and which, to each of us, if things proceed as usual, will be insanely subtle in the most personal way.

This show spells out a lot and hints at much more. There are fifty photographers of comparable abilities whose work could have been included, and as noted, given space, the work shown might have been expanded.

What does such a show do? Many things for one, it can point indirectly to local issues. There is a current dearth of environmental photographic work being done around Houston given the acknowledged toxic quality of much of our environment. There is work to do here for those who are interested.

Such a show can also enhance related educational programs such as Fotofest’s ecological weekend conference that brought a number of people together to discuss these issues. And like all exhibitions, it is a statement—in this case, a way to fight back, to gather people and problems together, and to present the problems systematically. It makes a difference for the issues involved, it gives the photographers a needed boost, and most important, it brings home these issues to a large group of viewers.

I hope it travels. It’s a compelling introduction for children (many of whom were wandering around goodbye—eased with their teachers and Fotofest’s guides), and as for the rest of us—we it sets off a complex and interrelated set of alarms, the cumulative effect being an unavoidable response to the difficult questions that the photographs pose. In this exhibition we are opened up rather than closed off, and in a show of this sort, one that doesn’t pull many punches, that is a major triumph.

Footnotes

Peter Brew is a Houston photographer. His work focuses on his immediate family and the landscape of the Great Plains.

"Images of the Earth" for me were the remarkable photo/text combinations by Hsien Tschiuda. Tschiuda went to a memorial archive in Hiroshima and there found a variety of personal artifacts—shoes, clothing, melted bottles, etc.—that had been unearthed close to the blast. Most had been brought to the museum by relatives. They are simple things, and the text, in both Japanese and sense of light are lovely and there is a forest spirit quality that is somewhat reminiscent of Andujar’s work with the Yaromans. These children are here and then gone, and we have watched them go. There is grace, there is complicity, and there is memorialization that feels very real. It’s an eloquent companion piece to the Hiroshima work.

There is a similarity of laying in Ellen Garven’s large and elegant wall piece, which is composed of rock and scrap metals of varied origins. She uses photographic images of animals like fossil in sedimentary deposits. Looking through the window pulled from an ancient century dump, the work just hangs onto its animal imagery: a photographic zebra skin, skeletal outlines—layered found objects quite

Susan Middleton and David Littenruger, Grizzly Bear, ND

Peter Goic, Artificial Ocean And Wild Island Water Park allung Truckle River from the series Aridig, Sparks, Nevada, 1993

Antonin Kratochvil, The Gardener
ISSUES OF IDENTITY
in Asian American Art

Editor's Note: Asian/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art is a national traveling exhibition of visual art by Asian Americans born abroad that focused on issues of ethnic identity. Curated by Margo Machida for the Asia Society Galleries in New York, the exhibition will be on view at Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston in June 1996. This article is adapted from a presentation that Margo Machida gave to the South Central Regional Conference of the Society for Photographic Education in Houston on November 12, 1994, organized by Houston Center for Photography.

Margo Machida

I'll talk about issues of identity in Asian American art and describe the context in which ethnic identity has emerged as a compelling subject for many Asian American artists in the contemporary American environment, and also how I got involved in curating and doing research in this area. I'll discuss four artists dealing with issues of identity in their art. I'll also discuss how art by Asian Americans is often mistreated by mainstream critics and curators, and the contentious position that assertions of race and ethnicity increasingly occupy in the broader art world discourse.

Having been involved with issues of identity for over a decade, I am constantly reminded that race and ethnicity are central concerns for many Asian American visual artists. Ironically, however, my own engagement with what it means to be of Asian ancestry in this society came relatively late. As a third generation Japanese American raised in a rural community in Hawaii, the majority population was Asian American and Pacific Islander, I never thought of myself as a member of a minority group until coming to the continental United States. The culture shock of being immersed in New York in the mid-1960s, where relatively few people shared my background at the time, and being forced to actively confront ethnic stereotypes and racial harassment, first brought home the reality of difference and the necessity to begin considering the meaning of ethnic identity in this nation.

Several years after settling in New York I gradually found myself turning to my art to ponder a lingering sense of displacement. In time, however, I was galvanized by my contact with Asian American community arts groups in New York, cultural activists, and artists who were playing our, before the public eye, their struggles with self-definition, and I was encouraged to delve into identity in my own work.

My subsequent development as a cultural activist and curator was directly related to my work as an artist. That began as a process of self-examination through ethnic and gender identity led to an ongoing investigation of the art of fellow Asian Americans involved with similar issues. Further, for Asian Americans of my generation it was evident that in a balkanized cultural environment where mainstream museums, galleries, magazines, and many alternative arts organizations rarely paid attention to this kind of art, much of our work would never be considered, much less accepted, unless we took the initiative in "valorizing" it. That is why a number of us took to wearing many hats as we concurrently become educators, curators, writers, directors, and art critics.

I'll briefly discuss the social context in which ethnic identity has emerged as an issue for Asian American artists. Asian Americans are now the fastest growing population in this country, and, if the present momentum continues, at least one in ten Americans will be of Asian heritage by early in the next century. However, Asian Americans still remain an exotic, seemingly foreign entity for many other Americans, known primarily through a host of stereotypes derived from European Orientalism and popular culture. Many in this nation view all Asians—especially East and Southeast Asians—as members of some sort of monolithic "oriental" entity.

ETHNIC IDENTITY & THE ARTS

Given their distinct backgrounds and experiences, both conceptions of identity and reasons for articulating those identities are usually different for American-born Asian artists and newcomers. Many raised in this nation, influenced by the idealism and activism of the civil rights, anti-war, and Asian American community arts movements of the '60s and '70s, have been particularly concerned with addressing matters of assimilation, race relations, loss and recovery of Asian roots, forging connections to historic communities and Asian forefathers in the Americas.

Alternately, for Asian immigrant artists, feelings of discontinuity, conflict and displacement that arise when making unfamiliar places and the need to negotiate a sense of place in a new home are often paramount matters. As a result, many first generation artists have been actively engaged in deconstructing making methods and iconographies that reflect an evolving, multifaceted sense of self in this nation.

THE ARTISTS

I have placed great importance on multiple, in-depth interviews with the artists, often conducted over a number of years. From experience, I have found that such an exploratory, dialogic approach has allowed me to better identify artists' intentions and, through them, themes that are central to conceptions of being Asian in contemporary America.

Also included are a few examples of what some Asian American photographers with issues of identity are doing. I'll refer to work from the "ASIA/AMERICA" exhibitions of Marlon Fuentes, Hari Th Pham, Tieng Kwong Chi, and also a piece incorporating photographic imagery by a third generation Japanese American artist, Tomie Arai. All of these artists, except Tieng Kwong Chi, appear in "Picturing Asia America" at Houston Center for Photography, November 5-December 23, 1994.

FIRST GENERATION

For Asian American artists born abroad, a number of factors, including their age at arrival, where they settle in the United States, economic status, the circumstances in which they left their homelands—voluntarily or involuntarily—often not only which subjects they emphasize, but also why and how they become artists.

Haru Thi Pham was raised in the former Republic of South Vietnam and fled as a refugee to the United States after the fall of her homeland to the communists in 1975. For years afterward, she remained haunted by memories of those turbulent years and incensed at the corrosive impact of outside powers on her nation. After immigrating she settled upon photography, not only to come to terms with the life she was forced to abandon, but also to assert that she, as an Asian and a woman, would not allow herself to be disempowered again.

In Number 9, Expiate Consciousness, 1992, a complex, wide-ranging work incorporating photography and text, the artist conveys elements of autobiographical, personal sexuality, familial history, and references to foreign domination of Vietnam. Asserting that she will not passively accept Westerner's notions of supremacy over Asians in her adopted country, in this segment from the piece, Pham defiantly depicts herself nude from the waist up with arms raised in a profane gesture before an inverted image of Buffalo Bill Cody, a famous cowboy who associates with America's nineteenth century westward expansion into the Pacific Rim. To reinforce this message, Pham, in a side panel, includes a fragment of a phrase in Vietnamese that she translates as "not in your serv-

"..."
produced by an Asian must, in order to be "truly Asian," automatically contain traces of destabilizing themes that be identified as emerging from an Asian sensibility. Certainly, in a curious game at recent reviews and catalogues from around the United States, Asian artists are readily found art by Asians (even Asian Americans)—no matter how contemporary or Western in form—described as "Zen-like, chanting like mantras, expressing the Yin and Yang of their subjects, or rooted in memories of nature. Although these Asian artists are indeed interested in traditions this language invokes, it goes without saying that such interpretations, when indiscriminately applied to any artist who happens to be of Asian heritage, are likely to be deeply flawed. Indeed, some Asian American artists have been dismissed for not meeting preconceived notions of "oriental-ness" (commonly encoded as something exotic, erotic, hyperaesthetic, or meditative), and hence for not being sufficiently "authentic." Ironically, when art by an Asian is informed by Western visual traditions, many critics automatically assume it must also be entirely imbedded in a Western conceptual framework—an expectation that is often not that rare, especially among first generation artists. Such reductive, dualistic notions not only belie the long history of East-West interaction and the accelerated pace of change in an increasingly industrialized and urbanized Asia, but also raise disturbing questions about whether contemporary visual art by Asians can only be esteemed by Westerners if it exists to mirror and confirm their expectations.

Ultimately, contending with difference requires the capacity to move beyond the prejudice and presumption that has greeted so many artists of color, in which their motivations and beliefs are selectively restructured to fit existing suppositions. What is at stake specifically for artists whose expressions originated in non-Western or transcultural frames of reference, is not simply exposure—for many of them have active careers in the West—but that their work is all too often misinterpreted or reinterpreted to suit mainstream expectations. What needs to be accepted is that there are many different frameworks of valuation and meaning—both within and among cultures—which must be both recognized and respected.

But it is precisely because attitudes in the art world, in many significant ways, mirror the social, economic and racial divisions (as well as long-standing power relationships) in American society that struggles exist over which cultural agendas, issues and artists are deemed significant. In such a contentious climate, I certainly believe that Asian American artists must strongly assert that they have distinct positions that must be respected. To do this, we must work to establish an environment in America—both political and cultural—that can allow for ongoing dialogue based on a fundamental belief in, active curiosity about, not only what we share, but also what is different.

Margo Machida is a writer, curator and artist.

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**PICTURING ANA AMERICAN** Panel Discussion November 12, 1994 presented in conjunction with SFAI South Central Regional Conference. Pictured are Monica Chiang, moderator, artists Gary Chua (Hi), Osamu James Nakajima (Thr), Nibita Uchida (BV), Gure Fint (GA), and Margo Machida (NY). artist-independent curator (I/c), Photo by B. Lynn Bullock.
Fashion: Evolution/Revolution was one of the 1994 Fotofest Exhibitions.

Ed Osowski

Lying at the very heart of fashion photography is conflict. A product of a consumption-driven economy, Anna Halloher describes fashion as a uniquely Western phenomenon, one tied up with class aspirations and priorities. Concerns for fashion depend on possessing the luxury of time and money and the freedom from more pressing concerns, like obtaining food and shelter. Nowhere does photography link the market place—the demands of business, commerce, advertising, and client—seem clearer than in images of fashion. Yet nowhere as well do the strains on the photographer's part to create something "higher" than commercial art reveal themselves with greater clarity.

Fashion photography is, then, a commercial art, controlled by forces that work together to make it a conservative art form. In fashion photography, an actual need—to cover the naked body—is subverted and transformed. Through fashion images the suggestion is made that clothing has a symbolic function beyond covering the naked form. In the world created by fashion images, one buys clothes that replace items that have worn out, been damaged, or no longer fit, not because they are like a watch that has broken and cannot be repaired, but because the "clothes" no longer work," no longer suggest those qualities—glamour, freedom, spontaneity, serenity, sexual availability, drive— which are better expressed symbolically by newer designs.

"Fashion: Evolution/Revolution," the title of the exhibition curated for Fotofest by New York gallery owners Ethelred Staley and Taki Wise, omitted the word "photography." That oversight set the tone for their selection of more than 100 photographs which provided a broad sweep through the history of fashion photography in the twentieth century. The oversight joined a peculiar misreading of the history of photography. In the notes to the exhibition, unfortunately not printed in the Fotofest catalogue, Staley and Wise disregarded photography's first six decades. They write, "The 20th century opened with photography in its infancy." Certain technical processes involved in the making and taking pictures were commonly more cumbersome and difficult to master early in photography's history. But by 1900 photography surely was no child. In fact, the earliest images in the exhibition, 1903 by Edward Steichen, for example, prove to be the most interesting in the exhibition. These images, Steichen's 1903 At the Beach and Lumière's 1906 Manet's and Monique Plaisance on the Beach at Ville-Vieille and his Two Women in the Surf, are accidental images of fashion. They are really snapshots in which family members and acquaintances move about in their daily lives. Only now, ninety years later, do these photographs contain some information about how a certain group of individuals looked and how they dressed when they appeared in public. As photographs what one notices least about them is their ability to illustrate.

Something quaint and naive and charming adheres to the earliest images in the exhibition. Free of the explosive cant and divine cultural aesthetic issues that fight for dominance in the last three decades of the exhibition, the early works by Edward Steichen and Baron Adolph de Meyer are, if anything, expressions of the significance of class. The models in their works stand, if only symbolically, on pedestals, where they are aloof, unapproachable, removed from the competing issues one finds dominating the later works by Helmut Newton and Christian von Wagnerheim. In the competitive world of glamour/fashion magazines, a photographer's ability to shock or tease or titillate may account for its success. By the time Staley and Wise reach the 1960s, the competitiveness in fashion photography has become a virtual explosion of images, many simply pushing too hard to attract the viewer's attention for two or three seconds. If beauty is success in fashion photography, it happens with the proliferation of fashion magazines after World War I. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, magazines like La Vie Parisienne and Le Lady's Book brought readers, through illustrations and line drawings, the latest styles. But after World War I one begins to see advances in technology, brought about by the war effort, that influenced civilian pursuits. Improvements in halftone printing brought the reproduction of photography in magazines into a new age. Products for a rapidly growing and suddenly affluent middle-class became the substance of these magazines.

With the period after World War I Staley and Wise, in the quest to lose focus. They introduce celebrity images—Douglas Fairbanks, Josephine Baker, Joan Crawford, John Gilbert, Fred and Adele Astaire—attempting to broaden their definition of fashion photography to include what they call "the evolution of manners, ideas of style and beauty, how people have looked and wanted to look, and how they wanted to be portrayed." Their attempt, interesting as it might seem, results in an exhibition that wanders without direction and fails to identify how the film industry, the rise of glossy columns in daily newspapers, and other editorial demands came to affect how photographs could be made and used.

Fashion photography is not produced in a vacuum. As 1960s, as Art Kane's 1960 image for Vogue shows, it can capture the feel one finds in another form of art: Kane's model, her black-and-white coat a jazz design, her body bent and manipulated, seems part of the pop and op movements of the 1960s. Looking back to the 1930s to see how surrealistic ways of making photographs appear in fashion work is more interesting. In Cecil Beaton's 1936 Mock Pajet Theatre two models are posed, their arms held aloft by ropes, like puppets on a stage. Beaton's image is radical and shocking and prescient. And from the perspective of almost sixty years after it was made, years during which feminism and women's studies have influenced the critical terms within which we look at advertising images of women are looked at, Beaton's image seems to represent woman as victim, as slave, if only to the manipulating factors of the fashion world. Beaton's 1936 photograph, accompanied by works by George Hoyningen-Huene and Horst B. Horst, demonstrate just how pervasive were surrealist experiments. The fragmentation of the body, the subversion of the part for the whole, and experiments with combining real with artificial were all among the tricks the surrealists used to challenge tradition and convention.

At this point in the exhibition one wishes for examples of Man Ray's fashion work. Be not including Man Ray, whose fashion work pushed the technical limits of picturomaking and whose choice of subject matter subverted expectations of how to look and what to see, Staley and Wise make the thirties seem tamer and the eighties and nineties wilder than they are.

In the exhibition's concluding sections the fashion image becomes preoccupied with expressing attitude, not content, style, not substance. Chris von Wagnerheim's sexually ambiguous image of two men dancing by Helmut Newton's changed images of semi-dressed female models by Herb Ritts' 1986 Madonna or Kurt Mccove's 1980 portrait of Derrick Cage are all less concerned with defining something correctly than with capturing something more fleeting—fame, desire, lust. In their selection of images Staley and Wise trace an arc that begins with a belief in the camera's ability to show and describe and concludes with the aesthetic and social issues connected to seeing and representing of primary importance. The photographs of Deborah Turbeville, Sanford Moen, and Ellen van Unwerth bring the exhibition in, and in a sense fashion photography, to an end. The works by these three are more shocking and more memorable than anything by Newton or von Wagnerheim and are more radical.
Editor’s Note: This interview is the product of joint work by CHEERS and BROADNA. CHEERS, curator of the exhibition “Songs of My People” and founder of the non-profit organization New African Voices, and Gary Broadnas, a Houston-based photographer included in the exhibition which was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, August 24-November 24, 1994. The 150-photograph show entered the museum’s permanent collection as a gift of New African Voices and Time Warner Inc.

Karen Gillen Allen

ALLEN: What event triggered the formation of the non-profit organization New African Voices? Was there something that happened while working as a photojournalist or did you start to see a misperception of African Americans emerge before either of you began your working careers?

CHEERS: The misperception of blacks that I had been seeing had been going on ever since I had been observing long before I had picked up a camera. One just has to be black in America to see every day how mass media portrays African Americans—less intelligent than we are, less hard-working than we work, more violent than we are, less patriotic, less universal. So, as I got older and got into photography and photojournalism, I knew that I always wanted to do something like this at some point in my career. I’ve worked for the Baton Rouge newspaper, Ebron Jackson magazine and I’d seen the misperception of blacks by the media all over.

BROADNA: Growing up, when a black man is presented with an image of himself through the media—the television and the newspapers, magazines—they’ve presented with what the rest of the world thinks of him, how the rest of the world perceives black people. A good example of this is if you go overseas where the only perception of America is what the media portrays. A lot of times people will say, “Well, black people are all poor and always get in trouble. Probably half of the impressions they get is either that we are very rich like Oprah and Bill Cosby and sports star like Michael Jordan; or we’re living in the worst areas of town, robbing, killing, and pillaging. It was the intent of the show to point out that we’re just like everybody else. We are college graduates, we have families, we have all the same pain and triumph that everybody else has. There are so many more black Americans that are just like everyone else. For a long time in streams, black people were trying to make it—it or ‘mooin’ on up.’ We finally made it! We’re up in the penthouse! It wasn’t until the Cosby show that it showed a middle class American family. Now, he wasn’t so typical because—a doctor and a lawyer, that’s not really typical. But, it was the first attempt to show a normal, black family going through normal problems. The intent of the show, and of the exhibit, was to show that we’re more than what the media portrays.

ALLEN: Do you think there was something that happened that made you get out and want to address the problem rather than just internalizing the negative and what the media was telling you?

CHEERS: My grandmother gave me my first camera and taught me it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. And the rest is history. What do you do? You can sit back and you can criticize, you can sit back and point fingers—you can do all of these things—but even Gordon Parks, someone who molest more than twenty years ago, in his second book, A Choice of Weapons, made the decision how to fight back. He chose a camera over a gun, a pen over a gun—to use those two to try to change our condition. And, that’s what I try to do—use the same tools that the media use to distort us to try to provide a more balanced, accurate and therefore universal picture of who we are.

BROADNA: The knowledge that these parameters exist influences your eye when you’re shooting. It has to. It’s like the media is feeding off of it. You’re always seeing photos of black men arrested for robbing banks and photojournalists. You are always seeing black people when it comes to poor neighborhoods and welfare. I mean, if that’s what’s presented, then a photographer would say, “Okay, I need to shoot someone on welfare, or I need to shoot someone in a poverty area.” What’s he going to do? Go out to a black neighborhood. There are obviously more poor white people on welfare than there are black people. But, it is that? Because, a black person in a management position who sparks up and makes the management sensitive to that. I mean it is their responsibility to do it. And they do it. A lot of times the management just doesn’t see the bias because they are not looking from the perspective of a black or Hispanic person.

ALLEN: How did your childhood experiences differ from that perceived by the media?

CHEERS: Growing up, I could not understand it because when you see all these stories—just recently, in Newsweek, a title like “Growing Up Without Fathers,” or something without fathers—there is a black child on the cover. Again, every time you look at the stories about these families, they always show it in some dysfunctional way. Always negative. And it just continues to bother me because I don’t have to search any farther than my own family, my father who had a high school education and worked three jobs, came home every day, brought home three paychecks every week—I don’t get it. What’s going on? It does not relate to my own personal experience.

BROADNA: Do you think that words, pictures, and exhibitions are going to be enough to address the problem of media misrepresentation? Do you think there will have to be some other type of movement?

CHEERS: Oh, we have done more than scratch the surface though we scratched the surface in a big way by having the exhibition toured around the world. We passed the 1,000,000 mark in attendance in May 1994. We will be touring probably until around the turn of the 21st century. We did it right! Is it enough? Of course not. Are there more projects that should be done, that should be funded? Of course. But as long as new media continue to print or broadcast, where the decisions are going to be made by a majority of white, middle-aged, males, who have absolutely no clue as to what the real
world is, we will continue to have this problem.

Allen: Geary, how did you choose prisons for the topic of your photo essay? Were you assigned a problem to address or was it an area of interest to you?

Broadnax: I was interested in sharing the problem of crime in our community. The penal system has been a part of life for black men for a long time. Inside, it was so bad, it was almost all black. I did see others, mostly Hispanics...but it was predominantly black. Being a black man this made it pretty scary for me. Lately, we thought, when you look at the pictures so many people were there for reasons they couldn't control—wrong place—wrong time—things like that. You know, we're black men and justice is not equal. You take a black man and a white man together in the same crime, the chances of the black man going to prison are much greater.

Allen: When you went there, how did the men react to you?

Broadnax: You know, it was funny, everyone was saying, "Hey, hey, look at me, look at me—check me out." I found them to be receptive to the camera or any connection with the outside.

Allen: How did the administration and the prison guard system react to you wanting to spend time inside the prison?

BROADNAX: Well, I was shut down. I was shut down repeatedly. My requests kept getting nowhere. Finally, a friend introduced me to the warden and we had lunch and he said, "I'd be happy to help you." While I was shooting the pictures a prisoner attacked a prison guard, kind of ran at him. That was exciting.

Allen: Did the prison administrators want to see what you had shot when you finished?

BROADNAX: Yes, the trouble with that was, I didn't even see what I shot. The way the contract read for "Songs of My People," we sent the pictures off and we didn't see the pictures. They didn't see anything for two years. And, then after two years, or some incredibly long amount of time, we saw the finished work.

Allen: Imagine a photographer shooting all these images and waiting for two years to see anything. So it was a tough assignment.

Allen: Now, by contrast the portrait of Allison Leland Briscoe seems so hopeful and full of life. It seems odd that it would be titled The Widow—her life in that portrait seems so full with those beautiful, rambunctious children.

BROADNAX: The kids were really wild. Janet, the older of the three was just all over the place. I wouldn't have wanted Briscoe to see it, but I didn't have a choice about the title. I wanted to show that she was getting on with her life even though she was a widow. She was raising her kids and her children's children. The kids had never been photographed for publication before.

Allen: How did you approach the task of making a photograph that was both visually pleasing and told a story?

BROADNAX: When you're a photojournalist you're trying to relay the essence of what you're feeling. You're not trying to make it pretty, you're not trying to make it ugly. You're trying to show you what you see—the truth. And the truth through your eyes is your responsibility.

Allen: Which do you think is the most universal image in the show? Is there something that seems to keep popping up that people point to and say, "Hey, this reaches everyone." Or is there something that is your favorite?

Cheer: The Jessie Jackson picture. Embracing his son. Because what that picture does more than just touch the heart and soul of a lot of kids—it eats at the--and here is the racist part of the media in terms of dealing with Jesse Jackson—they always tried to depict him as an individual that is so controversial—they always want to lump him in with Ataturk. You rarely read a story about the man and things that he's done. But this photograph, this candid picture, more than any picture ever taken of him, just cuts through all of this. It shows this individual not as civil rights leader, not as a talk show host, not as a newspaper columnist, this shows him as a father.

Allen: I thought the photo-essay of the homeless family was also very moving.

Cheer: Also the theme of family—the homeless family. I thought it was important and I give all credit to Michael Fields a photo editor for "Songs of My People." He came around and said, "This theme of the family has never been shown. We go to walk the streets, the downtown, the suburbs and we see nobody hanging out." I thought, "Some people must go somewhere in the evening, and it is your challenge as a photographer to follow them, to communicate with them, to be that fly on the wall, and document and show their existence out of the sight of the streets." So I was able to hang out with them and make that series of photographs. What I try to do is that even after the trauma—after the...what are they? Stills family. It made a major statement.

Allen: You had mentioned earlier that there were some stories that you kicked yourself over—the ones that got away. What would those be?

Cheer: The AIDS story. We blew it. We had a photographer shoot it and the photography did not do a good job of it, and we just ran out of time and did not tell that story. We didn't tell it at all. And I think that was a mistake. We didn't run it in the African American community at all. Again, we had a photographer on it and the photographer did not do a good job on it. The theme of the pictures where photographers did it and they had to go back and shoot over again, and we just ran out of time. If we had another month we could have covered so many things, but we just ran out of time.

Allen: What does the success of the show mean to you personally and what do you think that it means to the African American community?

BROADNAX: Well, I'm real happy about the success. I really am. I think it says that there's a need for projects like this, and that it's still hard to find funding for the next one.

Allen: What do you attribute the lack of response to? Do you have any feelings about this personally?

BROADNAX: Yeah. It really hurts me that photographers don't support black people. Often you find organizations and projects to be supported by large corporations. I'd like to see more black people taking an interest in helping support more black people supporting black artists. I see black artists singing and plenty of sports figures—I want to see a more well rounded support of the arts.

Allen: When you saw the whole thing come together, as an exhibit, what did you like most about it? Whether it's an image or just a feeling, what?

Cheer: What jumps out to me is when I go to the museum and see that work and I walk in there, doesn't matter if it's a weekday or a weekend, the place is packed with people—black and white people. When the-guide lines come up to me, especially the African American guards at these exhibits, and just shakes my hand and hugs me and almost cries. And they know good and well how many shows come in there that are aimed at our people. I don't know how many people walked up to me in four or five days that talked to me about the pain that they had been through in the '50s. Black people could only walk into a museum one day a week—one day a week for negroes. And how we've overcome this and about this generation and that these people are alive to see it. It means a lot to me. So, that's where I get my gratification. It has nothing to do with book sales. It has nothing to do with press clippings or anything like that. I just like to do it with the response from the people because that's what the show is about. The show is about ordinary people living ordinary things and extraordinary things do ordinary things.

Postscript: The show is in a 100-city tour sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and will return to the MFAH, its permanent repository, in 1998.

Karen Gillen Allen is editor of SPOT.
The Art of Collaboration

This essay is based on The Women Series by Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig, exhibited in Gallery X of Houston Center for Photography, January 13-February 19, 1995.

Lisa Righter Sloan

Although much larger, the photographs are individually reminiscent of keepsakes—lockets or miniatures passed on as heirlooms and bespeaking a highly personal bond of affection. Grouped as they are in random, close-knit proximity, the thread that weaves through the portraits is at once as fragile and mysterious as friendship and as strong as the carved bonds of family. Displayed against a dark brown wall in subdued lighting, the installation evokes the perfectly contrived porosity of a Victorian string room, a deliberate irony that punctuates the elegant, often stunningly beautiful work of collaborators Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig.

The images in Akin and Ludwig's recent work, including "The Women Series" (which was seen early this year in the "Bad Girls" exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and this summer at Gallery 777 in Los Angeles) and "The Diphrych Series," which pairs portraits of women with haunting image fragments (shown at the Pamela Auchincloss Gallery, New York in spring of 1994), are taken from portraits and landscapes by anonymous photographers from the nineteenth century to the present. The original works are unearthed at flea markets, junk stores and yard sales and rephotographed, in whole or in part, as their own works. As such, Akin and Ludwig lay challenge to a fundamentally nineteenth century notion, that of the artist as sole arbiter of creative content, and expand upon their often playful probe into the aesthetic boundaries of photography that began with their collaboration in 1984.

The genesis of the collaboration can be found in process—specifically, the technical process of making platinum prints—and it is the photographic process, rather than a shared vision of what they as artists want to create through the medium of photography, that continues to dominate the evolution of their work. While they credit their successful partnership to a joint desire to master a difficult and arcane printmaking process, an idea Akin and Ludwig did share, although largely an unconscious one in the beginning, was that the subject to which the photographic process was applied was secondary to the process itself.

Early in Akin and Ludwig's collaboration, their use of nineteenth century techniques—a 20x24" view camera and the platinum process used from the late 1800s until the 1920s—paid tribute to the richness and tonal value achieved by the early masters. Their work also acknowledged the irony of associating photography with the conventions of other art forms in which the artist's representation still dominated and the artist, instead, as sole author of that representation. The pair began photographing ordinary objects found in their studio, including nuts, bolts, nails, soda can pull tabs and a pair of vice grips. While the objects were photographed against plain backgrounds in as straightforward a fashion as any hardware catalogue, the resulting images, transformed by the platinum process used for printing are expansively elegant. As their work evolved, Akin and Ludwig became increasingly intrigued by the power of the platinum process to transform the final image into something at odds with subject. Material such as a cross section of a human head, or a skeleton of a deformed infant, both found at a medical museum, were used to test the boundaries of the photographic process and its ability to sustain the conflict between the horror of the subject and the undeniable beauty of the printed image. It became profoundly clear to them that the notion of representation, the primacy of subject, might indeed be at odds with the possibilities of the photographic process itself.

For these photographers, the notion of artistic primacy is secondary to the process as is the subject. They see their work as moving toward a state of authorlessness: a state they believe to be more purely characteristic of their chosen photographic medium. As Ludwig notes, "Photography is fundamentally a mechanical process. The act of recording doesn't require human involvement. The audience has to supply most of the creative material." Their collaboration itself is a diminution of authorship, one that Akin believes adds to the strength of their work. "It's cooler," she said, "to make the work what's important, because we've eliminated the possibility of ego involvement. But the collaboration makes us individually more willing to take a risk, and that also strengthens our work." The nature of this collaboration grows exponentially when one considers the manner of reference within each piece—from the anonymous photographers of the images used in...
Salgado’s Workers

Sebastião Salgado, Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age
Dallas Museum of Art, July 31 - September 25, 1994 and Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age, Published by Aperture, 1993

Mark Frohman

Brazilian-born Sebastião Salgado has established a reputation over the last decade that recalls the heroic photographers of the 30s, 40s, and 50s, recording the brutal facts of the world with a personalized aesthetic sensibility.

Workers is an intensive traveling retrospective of Salgado’s work on manual labor which he began in 1986. At the Dallas Museum of Art the exhibition was set up as a sort of exploration through the museum’s spaces: spilling out of rooms into the large passageway that connects the museum’s wings and filling the central enclose that houses the contemporary galleries. The show is grouped into sections according to industry and locale, ranging from roughly ten to fifteen photographs each. The cumulative effect of so many sites, however, does less to present difference than obscure it. Background and contextual information for each industry and region are presented in wall placards throughout the exhibition. In the Aperture publication of the same name the text is printed in a supplemental booklet. The surfaces of Salgado’s photographs speak of the photojournalistic practice that, as a member of the renowned Magnum photo agency, they have their origins in: they are dark and grainy, textured with the kind of tonal contrast that suggests harsh conditions, conveying the impression of the soil and grime that so often coats the sweat-soaked workers they depict. A few images have been enlarged and mounted frameless as plaques, indicating their slight remove from strictly fine art, but most are in sparse white frames with the location and year printed in the corner of the mat.

Workers is a project of enormous scope. Salgado has traveled the world in compiling his “Archaeology of the Industrial Age.” Documenting the conditions of mining natural resources such as coal, gold and oil, the manufacture of textiles, perfumes, and automobiles, the disembalming of cargo ships, the construction of the TGV Eurotunnel connecting France and England, and the felling of the Kuwaiti oil trees, Workers has taken Salgado across every continent.

Many of the images in Workers are undeniably magnificent and powerful to behold, though usually for conveying a sense of awe in their depiction of such enormities of effort. A frequent visual motif is the sheer massiveness of these industrial structures and materials which dwarf, enclose and all but swallow the individuals operating them. It’s not just Salgado’s frames; it’s quantity and repetition—a landscape of bricks in Rajasthan, India, a mountainside of Gold diggers in Serra Pelada, Brazil. Salgado shows manual labor as a David-and-Joelith-like struggle, the will of man, in a sense, to move mountains. He means not only to record the variety of hard, often repetitive, labor that takes place across the world but to endow it with the respect and dignity it deserves.

Yet there’s a difference between representing people with pride and asking for—to take one example from the history of documentary photography—better working conditions. Somewhere along the way this issue of respect (we might call it the ennobling image) has become the dominant issue for “concerned” projects like Salgado’s, replacing the kinds of social and political struggles that social documentary photography has attempted to stage in the past. Compared to the pre-war photojournalistic work by Lewis Hine, for example, which took a clearly critical position against working conditions under industrialization and was instrumental in initiating child-labor laws, Salgado’s work seems to have little effect beyond furthering his career. The photographs depict places far away, seemingly out of reach; there is a sense that these places are almost out of our reality. (A recurring scenario of otherworldly ambience—slum-drenched landscapes in Java, oil-trenched men in Kuwait—suggest the surface of another planet.) In fact, Salgado’s chosen subjects are extremely tempting for a photographer, and he is tempted. So many of Workers’ settings appear as if entirely constructed for Salgado’s camera, pregnant with drama, formal intricacies and human toll. The places and situations offer themselves up so easily to the image that one has to wonder how, for example, could one fail to take a breathtaking photo of the Kuwaiti oil fires?

Previous projects, such as his documentation of famine conditions in the Sahel desert, have taken criticism for their self-consciously aesthetic rendering, their concern with the picturesque and the frequent referencing of Judeo-Christian religious imagery. (Ingrid Sischy, in the September 9, 1991 issue of the New Yorker, described his work as “slumpy with symbolism.”) Salgado’s critics have argued that this approach tends to universalize the suffering of its subjects in a way that obscures their particular historical conditions. While Workers is less loaded in that it does not directly draw attention to suffering, one may still question Salgado’s methods and intentions. Consistently approaching his subjects as if armed with the New Vision, the photographs tend to be more present as image than information. A favorite technique of Salgado’s is abstracting humans into the forms of their surroundings until they become little more than specks on the landscape—fishermen become silhouettes in the sea, veiled Indian women carrying long pipes blend into the contours of the countryside. His images are carefully composed in a way that leads us to think of the photographer behind the lens as much as the subjects caught in front of it. The results can be formally satisfying, even beautiful, but if rendering beauty is really the intent here, Salgado and his supporters should be more honest about it.

Salgado professes greater claims than beauty. In the introduction of the text that precedes the plates in the Workers publication, a more subjective, personal account of these regions and labor settings by the photographer and writer Eric Nepomuceno, they claim that “These photographs tell the story of an era.” There’s a certain pretentious self-importance in such a statement as one which only also finds in the subtitle, “An Archaeology of the Industrial Age.” It sounds dramatic and epic but rings false. Originally referred to as “The End of Manual Labor,” Workers suggests a resolution to these complex economies that does not yet exist. In concentrating on his “archaeology,” he forgets that he’s still dealing with the present. For Salgado, it seems, less-developed nations provide a means of looking into the post-industrial world’s past, focusing on its mechanics, its textures, its flesh and bones, yet side-stepping the larger picture. Salgado and Nepomuceno state, “History is above all a succession of challenges, of repetitions, of perseverance. It is the endless cycle of oppressions, humiliations, and disasters, but also a testament to man’s ability to survive.” To invoke “an endless cycle” precludes any possibility of change, of changing an awkward position for Salgado to take considering that it is precisely the possibility of change that social documentary photography was founded upon.

The strength of Workers is in offering apertures into worlds that few of us can imagine as daily day-to-day series of rituals and labors. In the end, its weakness is in too easily accepting what is seen.

Mark Frohman is a freelance writer and artist living in Houston.
HIDDEN MESSAGES

the camera is Photographie Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irnas Collection. Co-published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993

K. Johnson Bowles

A lavishy printed, visually appealing book, the book is titled. "Photographie Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irnas Collection". The photographs are selected from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art collections.

The images of the Irnas Collection were acquired beginning in the early 1950s and include works by nineteen and twentieth-century photographers. Deborah Irnas states that her parents' acquisition philosophy "[a]s born from a comprehensive annual review by the late photography community (i.e., market, publishing, institutional) as worthy." Choices regarding the types of images were also based on "[a]boutique curatorial interests.

Within this collection many famous, and widely reproduced photographs include Edward Steichen's Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette, Paris, 1901; Robert Mapplethorpe's Self-Portrait (female portrait), 1982; Berthe Albro's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman, c. 1910; and Joel-Peter Witkin's Portrait of Joel, 1984. Work by Ansel Adams is included here, however, it is not included in the volume though it is included in their collection.

A number of self-portraits refer to the artist's overall body of work through the inclusion of many of their models - William Wegman and Marc Han, Hans Bellmer, and La Poupée (the doll), Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Lucy Belle Carter. These portraits also portray the life work of their artists, including those by Diane Michals, Cindy Sherman, Edward and Bud, and Lucas Samaras.

Not unlike music played at perfect pitch, some of the images chosen have a clarity of purpose and vision going beyond the material object and collecting images of the famous and the infamous. Artists such as Peter Keel said "Art does not reproduce the view but makes visible." And Self-Portrait, 1944. Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitsky) is a poignantly visible example. As the viewer examines the image he finds the bottom corner a hand to explain what is now understood to be a mirror image. Man Ray longingly touches his own reflection. The solitude appears almost painful. The image seems to be a confession of the soul and a concentration of the artist’s entire psych. An equally solitary and eloquent portrait is Edward Sheriff Curtis' Self-Portrait, 1899 from the series "The North American Indians," 1907-30. His characteristic dignified gesture in soft focus with a total range as rich as chocolate and smooth as silk is breathtaking. Another example of the beauty within the collection is Ralph Bartholomew Jr.'s Self-Portrait, 1940s. He's eyes are closed while he holds up a metal tray of flashbulbs. As they have never been lit. He appears to offer up a victorious torch of spiritual inspiration. Bartholomew's engaging self-portrait is well-chosen for the book's cover.

Self-Portrait in Mirrors, 1931 seems to be reproduced opposite one another solely because both photographs are looking through the lens and into a mirror. Lou Stomer's My Foot and Shoes, Saylor's Lake, PA, 1935 and the Mehemed Fellow Ada Self-Portrait, 1935 seem to be next to each other because they both have feet in them. In both pairings the emotional tone and context are discordant. It is perplexing since Irnas and Sobiesek spend so much effort discussing inter-connections across time and throughout the history of photography. Whether strictly chronological or based on conceptual relationships, a clear and consistent method of organization seems absent. Deborah Irnas' essay is thought-provoking in its questioning. She asks, "What stories do self-portraits tell us about the people who made them? Why are they dressed in 'costume'? If we know the photographer's larger body of work, does a self-portrait tell us something more than a simple look at the photographer?" and gain insight into the character of the photographic activity (in the nineteenth or twentieth century) from self-portraits. It raises other histories of photography different from the 'official' histories that might emerge from looking exclusively at self-portraits. The photographs are curated at the text and the curator's text.

Unfortunately Robert Sobiesek's idea about the nature of self-portraiture mostly float in a sea made turbulent by a seemingly endless stream of quotations. Perhaps more effort could have been made to provide additional background information that might answer the interesting questions Irnas poses. Sobiesek's theme of "interpreting the 'I' in self-portraiture is truly comprehending an 'other'" takes on a unintentional meaning of several of the self-portraits within this group. For example in Paul Outerbridge Jr.'s Untitled (Test Shot for 4 Rose Advertisement) there are three men posing as centerfold salesmen. Outerbridge could be any of them. Or in the case of a自画像, self-portrait, is recognized standing to the left. Like a loud reference to an inside joke, the lack of information here is pretentious. The biographies, too, could have been helpful here but their simplicity would likely be disatisfying to both the specialist and the casual observer.

Even as we have become skeptical of photography's truth-telling capabilities, we still tend to believe its smaller truths, its particular details as if they were hidden messages," Irnas writes. In the case of the camera image the message is a bit too hidden in unspirited sequencing, random format, and incomplete background information to excite the quest for discovery of both the smaller and larger truths. This report is perhaps why he has published this book, interesting subject and significant photographic collection.

K. Johnson Bowles is an artist and director of the Moreau Gallerie at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana.
FASHION
continued from p. 12
at their core, because, they articulate the argument that the camera can never speak the truth, that what it captures cannot be resolved on an abstract level, and that seeing is, by its very nature, problematical. Almost by accident, one senses "Fashion: Evolution/Revolution" made a statement, not about how styles of clothing have changed over nearly 100 years, but about how the camera, during that same period, has been free from its ties to illusion. Why Latour or Steichen or Stieglitz or Penn hold one's attention in the exhibition is because people today consider one to be the more critical and articulate witnesses who can point to the politics of seeing.131

Ed Osowski is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and his reviews appear regularly in the Houston Post.

FOOTNOTES
2. Anthropologists define "costume" as the traditional garments, highly utilitarian and evolving slowly, worn by indigenous peoples to distinguish them from "fashions," those garments subject to rapid changes in style and color as they are taken from a small group of people to the developed countries of the world. Color is more intense in conveying messages, but the power of the cloth is not the same. (Ed Osowski. 1994, p. 5.)
3. Using Penn's images of the natives of Peru, posed against the same neutral back-drop of his fashion work, are

Books Received
Conejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Fotografos de la Ciudad, Mexico: Conejo Nacional para la Cultura, 1993.
Parting Shots

Image as Issue

Mirroring our culture’s voracious appetite for “televisional” and journalistic voyeurism, the art world of the 1990s has seen a widespread increase in the production and exhibition of socially-engaged and politically-motivated works of art. While both of these trends have brought previously cloistered issues out into the light of day for discussion, the media’s tendency to abandon any topic for a more sensational one has cultivated an attitude of expendability towards issues in the public eye. To whatever degree, this attitude has diminished art’s potential to affect or contribute to any existing dialogue. Ironically, many artists are guilty of the same news-bite mentality, reducing their concerns to quick-read postures that their audience can nod along with. Though encompassing a broad spectrum of concerns, most of the work included in Image as Issue, at the Lawndale Art and Performance Center September 8 through October 15, 1994, curated by Houston photographer Richard Hinson and including photography and video from Texas, California, and Pennsylvania, addressed gender and body politics or sexuality: women and their bodies (Cara DeBeuk and Pamela O. Pitt); generational differences in attitude towards womanhood (Adelle Horne); commercial depictions of women in the media (Pitt again); women and violence (Nancy Floyd); sexual politics between men and women (Paul Hester); and homosexuality (Thomas C. Waters). In a series of often humorous photographs of plastic toys and other dime store knickknacks, Judy Bankhead, while alluding to a different issue in each image, still participated in the unwritten focus of the exhibition.

Avoiding the usual avenues for documentation of violence against women, Floyd’s Stopping Power series portrays women prepared to defend themselves. Comfortable and familiar with their means of defense, elderly, handicapped, and pregnant women brandish weapons in ways usually reserved for their more virile, male counterparts. The tension maintained between implications of empowerment and our culture’s fetishization of firearms, allowing wide interpretation to the point of “co-optation” by exploitative interests, sets Floyd’s work apart from that of the others, like Pitt’s, which resorts to stock depictions of women’s rallies. Also of note were Water’s attempt to address his own sexual awakening in photo-collages of abandoned bath houses (a kind of post-AIDS archeology) and Horne’s at first hermetic but ultimately intelligent and touching video, Fétid Voyeur.

Chris Ballou

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