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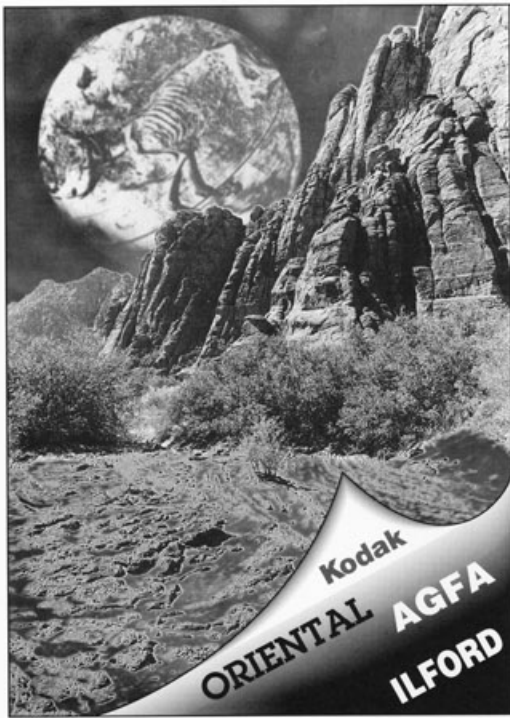


Abelardo Morrell

AMERICAN VOICES
LATINO/CHICANO/HISPANIC PHOTOGRAPHY
IN THE UNITED STATES

ISSUES OF IDENTITY
IN ASIAN AMERICAN ART

IMAGES OF THE WORLD • SONGS OF MY PEOPLE



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Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura Image of Brookline View in Brady's Room*, 1992

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 form—writings, photographs, music, we glimpse their inner explorations. With each work, we may see the visible distillation of the transformational experiences that have molded these people. The artists, in turn, glean 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 Marlon Fuentes, Hanh Thi Pham, Tseng Kwong Chi and Tomie Arai. All artists with the exception of Tseng Kwong Chi appeared in the Houston Center for Photography exhibition "Picturing Asia America" curated by Monica Chau 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 *Transgressing Boundaries*, Jo Ortel 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 sartorial history but also the power of our drive to consume.

Karen Gillen Allen

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TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES

American Voices, Latino/Chicano/Hispanic Photography in the U.S. was 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 De Soto and on display at Maldonado Consulting, showcased the work of local Hispanics. A far larger and more ambitious exhibit, with over 700 photographs by 39 photographers, "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.¹ The symposium was sparsely 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 Buitron, Charles Biasiny-Rivera, and Ricardo Viera. 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 Buitron curated the Mexican American segment, Biasiny-Rivera the Puerto Rican section, and Viera the Cuban American portion. Each section had a unique flavor and deserves careful critical attention on the basis of its own set of strengths and weaknesses; however, I would like to explore the difficult but related questions that the exhibition in its entirety prompted.²

With "American Voices," the curators sought to bring new visibility to a vital, but little-known part of U.S. culture.³ Further, they hoped to avert 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 first projected another image with the aid of a camera obscura. Because it inverts what it "sees," *Camera Obscura 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 fortress. The room comes alive with the unexpected confluence of two worlds, private and public, interior and exterior.

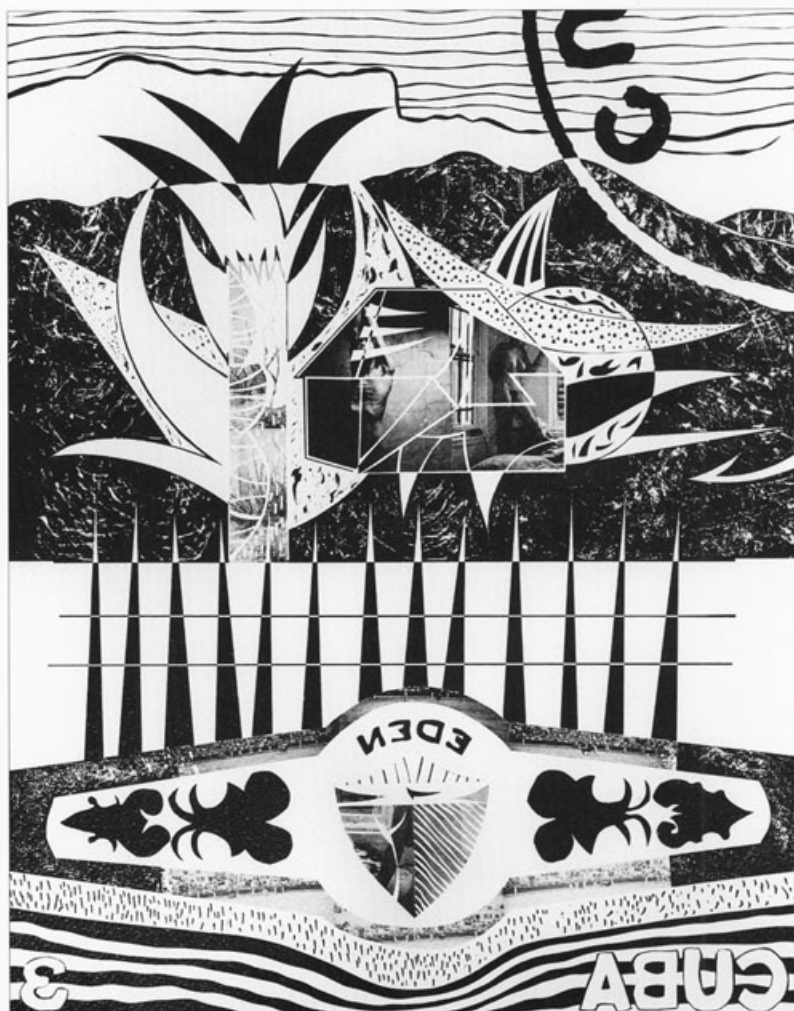
Morrell addresses questions of illusion and perception, fact and imagination in other seemingly straightforward photographs.⁴ In one series, Morrell positioned his camera obliquely and photographed the light glancing off shiny book illustrations. In *Book: Boy with Fruit* by Caravaggio, 1993, we glimpse only the indistinct, ghostlike image of Caravaggio's familiar painting; the figure appears very dark-skinned. The photograph is 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 conundrums 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.

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.⁶

Given these circumstances, Gomez-Pena is right to insist that we use pre-existing terms with the utmost care. Unfortunately, the curators of the



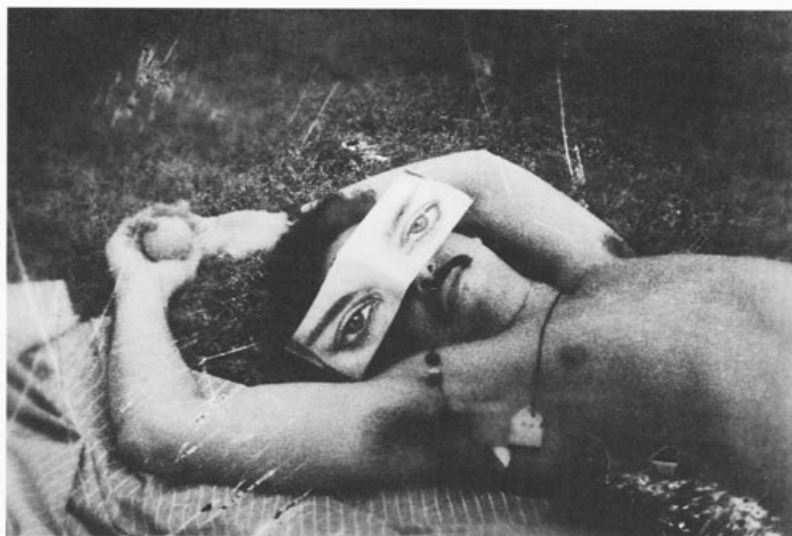
Maria Martínez-Cañas, *Eden*, 1991-92 from *Quince Sellos Cubanos/Fifteen Cuban Stamps*. In her re-constructed photographs, Cuban-American photographer Maria Martínez-Cañas re-works and re-presents images found on postage stamps. "A stamp," she writes, "is something to send, to dispatch, to bring news. It's the idea of a journey of physical travel. If a map is used to find and locate, then a stamp is used to deliver (send, separate) and to bring close (reconciliation). In this way, these stamps became an essential instrument in coming closer to my 'Cubanness'." — Jo Ortel

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? Whom 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.⁵

In fact, this absence points up 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

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 in the U.S.," perpetuated the inexact and disturbing usage of terms that Gomez-Pena (and others) find harmful. The caption seemed to suggest that the show would encompass work by photographers with cultural connections to all of the more than twenty-seven Latin American countries; in fact,



Néstor Millán, *Reyes* from the series *With Other Men*, 1987

Néstor Millán's photographs play with identity, with the figure, with our expectations of what we are looking at, and who is the subject, who is the object. They raise more questions than they answer. How, for example, are we to read the masked eyes against the open pose of vulnerability and intimacy in *Reyes*? What do we make of impenetrability paired with availability? The photographs in this series, *With Other Men*, made between 1984 and 1987, represent Millán's personal response to the disorienting experience of moving to New York from Puerto Rico in 1984 and entering a gay community that operated under an unfamiliar set of rules and prejudices. However, the photographs with their haunting subjects and their scratched, scraped surfaces (markings that were made on the negatives) speak of larger issues of alienation and loneliness, and of the fragility of human interaction, even as they reference specific and particular identities. — Jo Ortel



Marie Theresa Hernandez, *Mother's Day '94*



Delilah Montoya, *God's Gift*, 1993

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 clarification, the slippage or gap between what the title implicitly promised and what the exhibition actually delivered reinforced our North American tendency to conflate and homogenize distinct Latin American cultures. As one Brazilian photographer remarked, the show effectively rendered invisible all those artists with cultural ties to countries not included in the exhibition.

One wished for greater accuracy about precisely who was represented. Better still, the curators might have omitted a subtitle altogether. Of course, this alternative would have had its own limitations. But, as noted scholar Juan 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."⁷

The same problem of exclusion plagues the format that the curators chose to employ in "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) seldom 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 obfuscation may be unintentional: utmost precaution 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? Insidious, potentially harmful problems arise when a perspective or opinion is mistaken for or

propounded 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 topic or aesthetic rather than trying to provide a representative survey of the photography of entire cultures or ethnic identities. In fact, the organizers had hoped to provoke re-assessment of commonly-held assumptions about issues of cultural identity and authenticity, by emphasizing bi-culturalism and multi-culturalism. The subtitle in full read "Latino/Chicano/Hispanic Photography in the U.S.," 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, history, immigration and the experience of working between cultures."⁸ 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 transgressed, crossed and re-crossed.

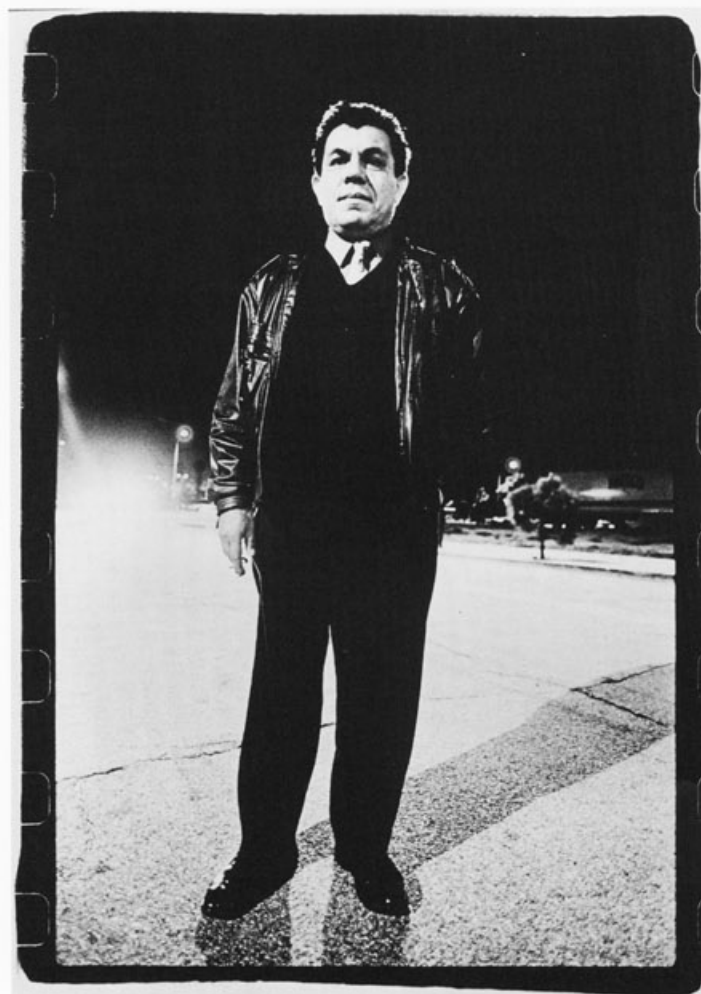
Among other things, the curators wanted to highlight the great *variety* of bi-cultural or intercultural experiences that are negotiated by ever-increasing numbers of individuals. The photographs included within the Cuban American section, for example, represented different periods of migration and settlement, as well as a host of diverse memories and political views of the exile brought on by the Cuban Revolution of 1959.⁹ Different *national* histories affect *individuals'* 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 offers the opportunity to reconsider the validity and usefulness of labels, to recognize their limitations in capturing the particularities of individual experience. Regrettably, however, scant information was provided in "American Voices" that could have set this line of thinking in motion for the viewer who saw the exhibition but did not attend the accompanying symposium. One could only speculate how Victor Vazquez or Arturo Cuenca, for example, positioned themselves culturally, where they reside emotionally, intellectually, physically (and for how long). The press release designated geographical places of residence (Vazquez: Puerto Rico; Cuenca: New York, NY), but it did not detail the length of residence or other intangibles.



Sandra Reus, *Bellea En Carnada*, 1988

Sandra Reus brings a critical perspective to the ritual of the beauty pageant that at once complicates and demystifies her subject. In *Bellea En Carnada*, for example, she juxtaposes the familiar image of contestants striking seductive, winning poses with a close-up that delineates just how painfully contorted such natural poses are. Other photographs by Reus on display in *American Voices* captured the artifice and the decidedly un-glamorous underbelly of this high-stakes objectification of women. Her candid snapshots of contestants interacting with family members, their features frozen in near-grotesque, disfigured, tense smiles, like her unposed shots of contestants sizing themselves up before full-length mirrors, reveal a multitude of truths behind the harmful myths and cultural constructions of femininity. But no single, reductive interpretation of these works suffices, for Reus exhibits them with panels of text that articulates a variety of perspectives on the phenomenon of the beauty pageant—including one that calls not for a good or bad judgment, but for a complexification of the issues involved. —Jo Ortel



Harry Gamboa, Jr., *Rene Yañez, Curator/Artist*, 1992

Harry Gamboa, Jr. tells a pointed anecdote about his series of photographs entitled *Chicano Male Unbonded*. After seeing the works, depicting male subjects posed in dramatically lit outdoor settings, a friend asked why all the sitters were so angry. "They weren't angry," he replied. "I'm the one who is pissed off." Gamboa sets highly respected and accomplished Chicano men (who are identified as such in the titles of the photographs) in urban street and nighttime settings—highly charged locales playing upon our stereotypes of the Chicano male. Further, he photographs his subjects from a low vantage point replicating in formal terms the sense of intimidation and the feeling of threat with which Chicano men are viewed in our culture. He hopes to jolt viewers into confrontation with their prejudices and stereotypes of Chicano males, to prod them to abandon the assumption that every (any!) Chicano male is suspect. Gamboa's intent is admirable; the aggressive intensity of his images will be off-putting for some viewers, who ironically will feel too intimidated to take the time to "get" his meaning. But, given the prevailing/continuing tense and antagonistic state of race relations in Los Angeles, Gamboa's home—and indeed, in all of the U.S.—drastic times require drastic measures. —Jo Ortel

Moreover, the photographers' works were grouped according to their ties to Mexican American, Puerto Rican or Cuban American cultures. 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 connections of each photographer to his or her respective Latin American country, the exhibition tended to bolster rather than challenge the view that ethnic identity is monolithic, impervious 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 transgressing boundaries, and of straddling 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 three overlapping and merging segments could have served as a rough metaphor to what Gloria Anzaldúa has so lyrically called the experience of "living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity."¹⁰

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, mused 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.¹¹ Though somewhat uneven, the Maldonado exhibit suggested to me that the problem does not lie in some unexplained 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, grainy black-and-white photograph by Maria-Theresa Hernandez, *Untitled (Mother's Day)*, *Rosenburg*, the startling image by Eduardo Munoz of a monkey jeering out from a cage, and the stark interiors by Juan Garcia from his *Grandmother Series* were as compelling and evocative 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 catalogue) will undoubtedly stimulate more discussion about presentation, and more substantive critical analysis of Latino photography. When both of these happen, it can only prove beneficial—for Houston as for the nation, for contemporary photography in general and for Latino photography in particular.

Jo Ortel received a Ph.D. at Stanford University and is currently writing a book on the contemporary artist Niki de Saint Phalle.

FOOTNOTES

1. The symposium was held on November 11-13, 1994. Puerto Rican scholar and professor Juan Flores, artists Harry Gamboa, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Juan Sanchez, Adal, Martina Lopez, Tony Mendoza, and Celia Munoz were among the featured speakers.
2. "American Voices" is scheduled to travel to destinations as yet unknown at press time. The published catalogue, will include essays by the curators, as well as by noted scholars and historians.
3. FotoFest press release announcing the exhibition.
4. According to Ricardo Viera, the photographer has called these works "meeting-places for fact and imagination."
5. Guillermo Gomez-Pena, "Border Culture: The Multicultural Paradigm," in the catalogue to "The Decade Show, Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s." New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, & The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990, p. 94. For a brief overview of the origins and usage of some of these terms, see Shifra Goldman, "Homogenizing Hispanic Art," *New Art Examiner*, 15 no. 1 (Sept., 1987), p. 30-33.
6. For a more complete discussion of some of the problems of names and of naming, see Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings, New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon, 1990.
7. Opening remarks of Flores' excellent talk presented at the symposium "Cross-Cultures," sponsored by FotoFest. A version of his talk will be published as an essay in the forthcoming exhibition catalogue to "American Voices."
8. FotoFest press release announcing the exhibition.
9. Ricardo Viera, in a presentation at the FotoFest symposium.
10. Gloria Anzaldúa, preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera, The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987. To be sure, the primary bi-cultural exchange the curators were hoping to present was that of each of the three Latin American countries with the U.S. As they moved through the exhibition space, the "American Voices" visitors would have made "border crossings" bridging the three Latin American countries. Still, even if it were not exact, the analogy might have been usefully exploited. And, in any case, many of the photographs (and photographers) included in the exhibition embodied multiple crossings, intercultural influences and connections. Certainly during the FotoFest symposium, one could witness very real exchanges occurring between photographers and individuals from the three countries.
11. Mindiola was speaking in particular of Mexican Americans. His talk offered an excellent, if overgeneralized, 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.



Catala Gorea, Jennifer, AKA Rami, Oakland, CA 1993

FROM THE EDGE

"Images of the World"

Images of the World was part of 1994 FotoFest's The Global Environment, a three-part exhibition that also included The Hall of Globes and The Earth Forum.

Peter Brown

One of the contributions that FotoFest, that slightly schizophrenic mix of wineing and dining and egalitarian principle (a Neiman Marcus styled Walmart of photographic endeavor), makes repeatedly to the City of Houston concerns the intersection of lives. People meet people, people talk and share work and then, in a more one-way relationship, viewers, through the seemingly simple process of looking at pictures, are introduced to disparate lives and ways of living. At a bedrock level, FotoFest represents an educational opportunity for anyone interested in photography and in photography's response to contemporary culture. It produces thought, growth and quite often the motivation for work.

The approximately 200 photographs included in "The Images of the World" section of the "Global Environment" do all of this. As good as the work generally is, the overall show serves more as an environmental pointer, an index of hotspots that we 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 a host of environmental problems) still has the desired cumulative effect. One exits the center squinty-eyed, checking the Houston landscape even more so than usual for signs of toxicity, sniffing the air—immediately confronted with inner city issues (homelessness and decaying housing) on three sides of the convention center, while on the other, those skyscrapers, memorials to old demolished Houston, shine down like Prozac. Thoughts spin to refineries, to ground water, to a burning San Jacinto River, to the embattled coastal prairie, 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 its expansion. Most of them, unsurprisingly, are quiet calls to arms. "Images of the World" as a 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, ruins 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, oftentimes dangerous, unsettling work; work that is not appreciated or rewarded in ways it should be. It can 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 cries 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 as the show reads 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 keyed 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 plumbed 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 resonate as well: Superfund, Chernobyl, endangered, rain forest, Hiroshima, toxic, cold war, nuclear, overcrowding, cancer, etc. And as they pop up, so do our everyday,



Martha Madigan, *Dance Identity*, 1993



Hiromi Tsuchida, *Hiroshima Collection*
Student Uniform, Akio Tsukuda (13 at the time) was engaged in fire prevention work about 800 meters 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.

shielded responses. The work, on the whole, confounds these responses, and it is the success of the confounding that I would like to examine here.

The question is always an important one, and one that has become almost a photographic cliché today: given that we are surrounded by horrendous problems that are certain to become worse, and being photographers with certain talents, predilections and work histories, if we choose to combine our ethics with our aesthetics, how are we best to use the abilities we have to make the world a more livable place? For some, this is dismissable, not the realm of art, or perhaps, not a strength; for others, it has

been the unavoidable stuff of life since coming of age; for the majority though, captured by the simple magic of photographic imagery, and the beauty and mystery of everyday affairs, there is confusion, a feeling of wanting to remain true to a personal vision and to incorporate within it the political reality within which one functions.

Robert Adams, in his new book *Why People Photograph* writes, "If the state of our geography appears to be newly chaotic because of our heedlessness, the problem that this presents to the spirit is, it seems to me, an old one that art has long addressed. As defined by hundreds of years of practice—I think this

history is vitally important—art is a discovery of harmony, a vision of disparities reconciled, of shape beneath confusion. Art does not deny that evil is real, but it places evil in a context that implies an affirmation; the structure of the picture, which is a metaphor for the structure of the Creation, suggests that evil is not final." An imposing thought to bear with each depression of the shutter perhaps, but one that I think most of these photographers, despite the biblical terminology, would take on.

And this show, perhaps unconsciously, but certainly quite effectively, outlines a variety of strategies that seem to work. Most seem to revolve around making the unpalatable truth, the thing we

would rather avoid, into something challenging. Those represented here generally accomplish this within the traditions they have chosen and in which they have been trained, and these are various: photojournalism, anthropology, f/64 landscape, studio portraiture, street photography, image and text combinations, and large scale imagery meant to be thought of as "art."

Many approaches are at work—dead-on truth, seduction, placing unfamiliar subjects in familiar territory, using familiar styles in unfamiliar places, moments of delicacy that transcend the ugliness of a scene, words used to explain, baits and switches, a flowing

narrative that suddenly takes a nasty turn, surface beauty with very troubled depths, and more. All seem fair play to me, given the stakes. And all are used.

Marcos Santilli's photojournalistic work in the Southern Amazon 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—jungle finally wiped out of all except earth. Trucks and mud predominate. In a slide presentation that Santilli gave (a before-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 them, the images as evanescent as their fate seems to be. My first reading of these was anthropological and I thought in these terms until confounded by the beauty of the photographs themselves. They are wonderful, filled with strange out-of-focus areas that softly buttress 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 archaeological restoration, while nature takes a few whacks at ancient civilization—points less pressing than others in the show, but certainly worth making nonetheless. Python-like roots wrap 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 poley Grizzly bear, a riveting cougar, a comically mustached sturgeon, a disinterested Wood Bison, snails that have arranged themselves into slow whorls, and Westons Aloes. Middleton and Littschwager make these creatures and plants almost too accessible to us, and in this, notes are struck. The animals are brought into our world, photographed with Avedonesque 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—last survivors, remnants, although 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,



Masumi Hayashi, EPA Superfund Site Summit, Deerfield, Ohio, 1991

gridded, almost quilt-like color landscapes that at first appear perfectly normal. Hayashi, in her wall statement talks about a first visit to one of these sites and how taken in she was by its beauty. She then immediately wondered what he had missed seeing elsewhere. The question became, how does one photograph the invisible, and her response was to grid the surface of the picture into smaller photos (an art world convention) to make the scene as a whole naturalistically attractive (full sun, autumn skies) 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, Antonin Kratochvil, David H. Wells, and Arturo Garcia Campos look at 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 planes spraying towns, and the kids from all over being born with birth defects, makes the jolting global point. Stylistically the work moves well from image to image, all of the photographers using a Eugene Smith sort of committed journalism.

Peter Goin and Bob Dawson, co-founders of the *Water in the West Project*, deal with water—its use, its scarcity and its politics. They use large format cameras and work within a landscape tradition that passes from O'Sullivan and Muybridge to Adams and Weston to Caponigro and Clift, I guess. And they use it, as do a variety of their generation, to new 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—Goin has two stunning multi-image pieces describing quite different political geographies that look similar, one a game refuge, the other an enormous toxic waste dump)—but perhaps the work is most effective, in terms of change, as a book. We simply have more information, and much that they are trying to convey is done well

through words. The collective aspects of the *Water in the West Project* can be educational. At least a dozen photographers work in this loosely conjoined group of people who are sprinkled about the West, dealing in different ways with environmental issues that crop up in their home areas.

Toshio Shibata produces beautiful large format work on Japanese anti-erosion projects. These are photographs of gridded Ferro-cement casts, reconstructive surgeries of a sort that are laid out over mountainsides to save the highways below. One thinks of the immensity of financial commitment that each of these represent, the thought and the time. They're like nightmare Christos from which there is no waking up—wrapped mountains. And again, the photographs themselves are beautiful. Rich tonal scales, elegantly composed:



Marc Riboud, La Som, Tower of Four Faces at the Temple Entrance, 1969



Barbara Norfleet, A Darker Print

subversive soldiers stealing onto the walls of the well to do, one assumes. There they will refine and chip away—planting doubts and raising questions like so many of the "art" pieces in the show, all clearly destined to be sold for their mixed message of surface beauty and ecological carnage.

Much of the inner city work is photo reportage—telling the story quickly in an image or two and shocking out a response if possible. David Shames' photographs of children in a variety of cities do this. One, a boy jumping from one building to another, eight stories up, stands out in this respect. The seemingly staged photograph records an everyday event and raises difficult questions as far as I'm concerned, a fifth-grade friend of mine, Kenneth Bellinger

having died doing this. Do you ask a kid to jump? Do you say you'll take his picture if he volunteers? It's an apt metaphor—for those kids, like all of us, are teetering on the brink. There's Crack smoking, kids sleeping on the streets, and guns. Things we know and try to ignore daily.

The shock value of Ryuji Miyamoto's photographs of the beehive-like walled city in Kowloon is somewhat comparable. The homes are so crammed together that they appear unreal, a bit like Sebastiao Salgado's photographs in the gold mines in Brazil. They have achieved something irreducible in their architectural compression.

The photographs of Caracas represent, in a way, the terminus of earlier Amazon shows. This is the total paving

over of South American. Old Caracas, 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 Meyerowitzes, or compressed

Friedlanders, grabbed bits of order, sidelong glances that fall together—as much surreal takes on urban existence as they are political documents.

In the aesthetic that Barbara Norfleet (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 aridity, 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 tore these people to bits.

The final section of the show deals with large scale multi-media, 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 photogram 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, compared to the rest of the show, seeming coolly 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 purposefully flip but it somehow stayed with me in its bleak, careful perversity. He seems beyond mourning—seeing nothing on the horizon but more garbage. He's at one in a swirling moment, with a happy mask of cartoon humor firmly bolted 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. Nudes float into the sky, cafes sprout rockets, Ayres Rock glows as an aboriginal Australian is vaporized, bats zing out of Carlsbad Cavern to poison us, a "relocation camp" 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 intensely subtle in the most personal ways.

This show spells out a lot and hints at much more. There are fifty photographs 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 curious 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 goggle-eyed with their teachers and FotoFest guides), and as for the rest of us—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

1 Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph*, New York, NY: Aperture, 1994, p. 181.

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



Antonin Kratochvil, *The Gardener*



Peter Goin, *Artificial Ocean And Wild Island Water Park along Trucker River from the series Aridity, Sparks, Nevada, 1993*



Susan Middleton and David Littschwager, *Grizzly Bear, ND*

"Images of the Earth" for me were the remarkable photo/text combinations by Hiromi Tsuchida. Tsuchida went to a memorial archive in Hiroshima and there found a variety of personal artifacts—shoes, clothing, melted bottles, a pocket watch—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 Yanomami. 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 layering in Ellen Garven's large and elegant wall pieces, which are composed of rock and scrap metals of varied origin. She uses photographic images of animals like fossils in sedimentary deposits. Looking like detritus pulled from an art-conscious twenty-first century dump, the work just hangs onto its animal imagery: a photographic zebra skin, skeletal outlines—layered found objects quite

ISSUES OF IDENTITY

in Asian American Art

Editor's Note: *Asia/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 transcultural 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 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 misinterpreted 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, where 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 where I was forced to actively confront ethnic stereotyping 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 out, 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. What 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, theoreticians, and historians.

I'll briefly discuss the social context in which ethnic identity has emerged as an issue for Asian American artists. Asian 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 forebears in America.

Alternatively, for Asian immigrant artists, feelings of discontinuity, conflict and displacement that arise when traversing cultures, 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 devising art making methods and iconographies that reflect an evolving, multilayered 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 who work with issues of identity are doing. I'll refer to work from the "ASIA/AMERICA" exhibition of Marlon Fuentes, Hanh Thi Pham, Tseng Kwong Chi as well as a piece incorporating



Tomie Arai, *Laundryman's Daughter*, 1989

photographic imagery by a third generation Japanese American artist, Tomie Arai. All of these artists, except Tseng 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—influence not only which subjects they emphasize, but also why and how they become artists.

Hanh 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 seized 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 never allow herself to feel disempowered again.

In *Number 9, Expatriate Consciousness*, 1992, a complex, wide-ranging work integrating photography and text,

the artist conflates elements of autobiography, 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 she 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 as your servant," a direct reference to the house-keeping jobs her grandmother took with the French, and later with the Americans, to support her family.

Marlon Fuentes, a photographer, conceptual artist, and filmmaker, came to America from the Philippines at 20. Born in Manila, his youth was marked by violence accompanying the rise of Ferdinand Marcos. After more than fifteen years in the West, he continues to wrestle with the feelings of cultural instability, and has come to view his art making in this country as "an orienting device" that allows him to confront what he terms the "internal schizoidness" of carrying the cultural baggage of East and West. Fuentes considers the face the primary repository of an indi-



Tseng Kwong Chi, Disneyland, California, 1979

himself an "unofficial ambassador of China" and inaugurated what he termed a "lifetime project" wryly titled "East meets West."

To summon a figure with a stature comparable to those Americans who initially had ready access to China and to invert metaphorically the position of Chinese and Westerners, in 1979 Tseng started to dress in a "Mao suit," a costume he believed would be instantly recognizable as an emblem of modern China. By choosing to play "the role of a very formal Chinese tourist" and taking snapshot-like images of himself in association "with monu-

the United States—the work of many artists I've interviewed reflects a yearning to re-establish a sense of connectedness with a distant Asian legacy. Yet because they are also more fully Americanized than earlier generations, they tend to locate their images of Asian identities in the only homeland they have ever known, America.

Tomie Arai is a third generation Japanese American printmaker and mixed-media artist, who integrates photographs in her work. She was raised on the upper west side of Manhattan, an ethnically-mixed community that included a small Japanese enclave. In seeking to affirm and project the unique experience of being an Asian woman in America, Arai constructs images of intergenerational continuity based on women's relationships in Asian families, thereby linking her personal history to the immigrant legacy of all Asian women.

In *Laundryman's Daughter*, 1989, a silkscreen print, the artist explores reversals of traditional relationships between immigrant mothers and American-raised daughters—not only emphasizing that in this nation, children frequently have had to become translators and caretakers for immigrant parents, but also suggesting that for many East Asian women, circumstances in America have often subverted the legacy of Confucian mores giving primacy to parents as elders and therefore figures of unquestioned authority.

INTERPRETATION OF ASIAN AMERICAN ART

There is no such thing as a singular or definitive contemporary Asian American experience. Nor are Asian American identities static—rather, they are constantly being reconceived and transformed. Further, with the convoluted mingling of influences in a world where mobility reigns and boundaries between cultures are becoming porous, the ever-broadening range of Asian reactions to life in this nation is increasingly complex.

In such a complex Asian American environment, I strongly believe that investigation artists' intentions is necessary to counter limitations and distortions inherent in ethnocentric biases that remain prevalent in contemporary American art criticism. Among them are fanciful expectations that any art

produced by an Asian must, in order to be "truly Asian," automatically contain traces of something that can be identified as emerging from an Asian sensibility. Certainly, in a cursory glance at recent reviews and catalogues from around the United States, one can readily find 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 some 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 even been dismissed for not meeting preconceived notions of "oriental-ness" (commonly encoded as something exotic, serene, hyper-aesthetic, or meditative), and hence for not being sufficiently "authentic." Ironically, when art by an Asian is informed by Western visual conventions, many critics automatically assume it must also be entirely imbedded in a Western conceptual framework—an expectation that is often not the case, 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 especially for artists whose expressions originated in non-Western or transcultural frames of reference, is not simply exposure—for many of them have active careers—but the fact 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 valorization 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 we have distinct positions that must be respected. To do this, we must work to establish an environment in America—both political and cultural—that allows 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.



Marlon E. Fuentes, Untitled from the Face Fusion series, 1986

vidual's history as well as the site of emotional struggle. He began to use disjointed facial images to signal that he viewed himself as a "perpetual outsider" who remained suspended between two cultures with very different approaches to life. In the manipulated black-and-white photographs of the "Face Fusion" series, Fuentes combined fragments of features—his own and those of his Caucasian wife at the time—to confront his sense of cultural and emotional dislocation.

Tseng Kwong Chi, who died in 1990, was born in 1950, a year after his parents fled Shanghai when communist forces assumed power. As a result of growing agitation stemming from the Cultural Revolution, when Tseng was 16, his family again relocated, this time to Vancouver, Canada. He soon left to attend art school in Paris and in 1979, moved to New York where he quickly immersed himself in the burgeoning avant garde and performance scene centered on lower Manhattan.

There Tseng found himself drawn to observe Asian tourists and perturbed to discover that not only were there few Chinese sightseers at the time, but the majority appeared to be so "completely westernized that you cannot really tell if they are Chinese, or Korean, or Japanese." Merging his dual interests in photography and performance, Tseng with tongue firmly in cheek, appointed

ments and icons that westerners consider to be the symbols of their power and glory" such as the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., Disneyland and Mount Rushmore, Tseng sought to counter the long history of orientalist painting and photography by explicitly representing the West as if seen through a possessive "occidental" gaze.

THIRD GENERATION

By the third generation—the children of parents who were also born in



"Picturing Asia America" Panel Discussion November 12, 1994 presented in conjunction with SPE South Central Regional Conference. Pictured are Monica Chau, moderator, artists Gaye Chan (HI), Osamu James Nakagawa (TX), Ritsko Uchida (NY), Gavin Flint (CA), and Margo Machida (NY), artist/independent curator (l to r). Photo by E. Lynn Baldwin



Cecil Beaton, Angelica Weldon and Nina Matleva, *Mock Puppet Theatre*, *American Vogue*, 1936



Deborah Turbeville, *Bathhouse*, *American Vogue*, 1975

FASHIONABLE CONSUMPTION

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, Anne Hollander describes fashion as a uniquely Western phenomenon, one tied up with class aspirations and priorities.¹ Concern for fashion depends on possessing the luxury of time and money and the freedom from more pressing concerns, like obtaining food and shelter.² Nowhere does photography's link to the marketplace—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.³

Fashion photography is, then, 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 clothing not to 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, seriousness, sexual availability, drive—which are better expressed symbolically by newer designs.⁴

"Fashion: Evolution/Revolution," the title of the exhibition curated for FotoFest by New York gallery owners Etheleen 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.

That oversight joined a peculiar mis-reading of the history of photography. In the notes to the exhibition, unfortunately not printed in the FotoFest catalogue, Staley and Wise

disregard photography's first six decades. They write, "The 20th century opened with photography in its infancy."⁵ Certain technical processes involved in the making and taking pictures were certainly 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, works by Lartigue and Steichen, for example, prove to be the most interesting in the exhibition.

These images, Steichen's 1903 *At the Races* and Lartigue's 1906 *Nanick and Monsieur Plantevine on the Beach at Villeville* 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 divisive cultural/aesthetic issues that fight for dominance in the last three decades of the exhibition, the early works by Edward Steichen and Baron Adolf 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 Chris von Wangenheim.⁶ In the competitive world of glamour/fashion magazines, a photograph's ability to shock or tease or titillate may account for its success. By the time Staley and Wise reach the 1960s the competition has become a virtual explosion of images, many simply pushing too hard to attract the viewer's attention for two or three seconds.

If a break occurs 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 *Godey's Ladies 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 begin 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 have wanted to be portrayed."⁷ 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 gossip columns in daily newspapers, and other editorial demands came to affect how photographs could be made and used.⁸

Fashion photography is not produced in a vacuum. At times, 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 jazzy design, her body bent and manipulated, seems part of the pop and op movements of the 1960's. Looking back to the 1930s to see how surrealist ways of making photographs appear in fashion work is more interesting. In Cecil Beaton's 1936 *Mock Puppet 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 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 substitution 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 wished for examples of Man Ray's fashion work. By not including Man Ray, whose fashion work pushed the technical limits of picturemaking 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 Wangenheim's sexually ambiguous image of two men dancing or Helmut Newton's charged images of semi-clothed female models or Herb Ritts 1986 *Madonna* or Kurt Marcus' 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.⁹ The photographs of Deborah Turbeville, Sarah Moon, and Ellen van Unwerth bring the exhibition, 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 Wangenheim and are more radical

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Art Kane, *Vogue Fashion*, N.Y., 1960

SONGS OF MY PEOPLE

Editor's Note: This interview is the product of talks with Michael Cheers, curator of the exhibition "Songs of My People" and founder of the non-profit organization New African Visions, and Geary Broadnax, a Houston-based photographer included in the exhibition which was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, August 28-November 20, 1994. The 150-photograph show entered the museum's permanent collection as a gift of New African Visions and Time Warner Inc.

Karen Gillen Allen

ALLEN: What event triggered the formation of the non-profit organization New African Visions? Was there something that happened while working as photojournalists 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 or 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 *Boston Globe* newspaper, *Ebony/Jet* magazine and I'd seen the misperception of blacks by the media all over.

BROADNAX: Growing up, when a black man is presented with an image of himself through the media—the television and the newspapers, magazines—they're 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, rioting, 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 triumphs that everybody else has. There are so many more black Americans that are just like everyone else. For a long time in sitcoms, black people were trying to make it—or, "movin' 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 go 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, somebody who I met 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 knife, 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.

daily basis. I get the phone calls and they tell me stories all the time about "can't have too many black people in the newspaper"—whenever they want to do a welfare story or whenever they deal with a crime story—nine out of ten times they rush to the African American neighborhood, knowing full well that there are more white people on welfare in this country than blacks. There are more white children who are living in families headed by a single parent than there are black children.

BROADNAX: The knowledge that these parameters exist influences your eye when your shooting. It has to. It's like the media is feeding on itself. You're always seeing photos of black men arrested for robbing banks or mugging people. 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 speaks 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.

Look at the retouched image of O.J. Simpson. How responsible was that? "Hey, we didn't think there was any problem with that." You know, it's just an artistic impression of what we thought it might be like. No one was there to point out to them, "Hey, you could have a problem there." So, the solution to the problem would be to have a much greater minority presence on all decision-making positions in the newsroom. I'm talking about editorial management positions, as a news director, as a managing editor, those types of professions. Even if it's the associate positions, they need to really increase the level of minority influence on all newspapers. Again, you'll find the attitude, "Well, they don't read our newspaper anyway, why should we care?" You'll get that attitude.

ALLEN: How did your childhood experiences differ from that portrayed 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.

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

CHEERS: Oh, we have done no more than scratch the surface though we scratched the surface in a big way by having this exhibition tour 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 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 newspapers and organizations, in 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



Geary Broadnax, Widow Allison Leland, 1992



Geary Broadnax, Texas Department of Corrections Guard on Horseback, Sugarland, Texas, 1992

ALLEN: Did you find while working as a photojournalist and journalist that others who were also working within these parameters were also chafing under them? Did you have a lot of consensus when you started asking others to join you in addressing the media misperception of African Americans?

CHEERS: There are many, many African American photographers out here who feel the same way that I do. This is not something that is just felt by me. Many black photographers, especially those working for white newspapers and magazines, deal with this on a

much easier to find a black person because they have already been identified. He's already been identified as poor.

ALLEN: Geary, you were in a position as a photo editor at the *Houston Post* where you were able to choose the photographs. Could you address the problem of media misrepresentation? Did you go to bat for photographs that you felt were valid?

BROADNAX: Yes, and I tell you it was an everyday thing. It got to the point where the editors would come to me and ask me, "What do you think about

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 showing 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. Later, we thought when look at the pictures that so many people were there for reasons they couldn't control—wrong place—wrong time—we both said it—but for the grace of God, that could be me. 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—we didn't see anything for two years. And, then after two years, or some incredibly long amount of time, we saw the finished work. 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. Jarret, the older of the three was just all over the place. I wouldn't have named the pictures that, 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 moving on for the children's sake. 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 photo-journalist 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 what you see—the truth. And the truth through your eyes is your responsibility.



D. Michael Cheers, Doctors Karen Ambrose, Paula A. McKenzie and Deborah Arrindel, Washington, D.C., 1992

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?

CHEERS: The Jesse Jackson picture. Embracing his son. Because what that picture does more than just touch the heart and soul of a lot of dads—it cuts 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 Arafat. 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: Michael, I thought that your two images of two women giving birth—the woman who had been addicted to Crack, and the middle class woman and her husband giving birth to their first child were moving. Seeing the play between the two different starts to a life—was that a purposeful juxtaposition?

CHEERS: Right. Again, I just wanted to personally go out and tell that story about the confusion in the African American family. The question that just kept coming up was how do you do it? Besides family around holidays, something sort of clichéd like that—what do you do? I remembered how I felt with the birth of my third child and the emotion that I felt—the love I felt for my child and for my wife. And so I worked hard to find a couple and they were very, very gracious in allowing me into the birthing room in a very personal moment. And to see the father exhibit that emotion and the other symbolism

there inside that picture—you have a black OB-GYN, talking about black women who are professionals, and a black anesthesiologist there in that picture. There's a lot of symbolism there.

On the other hand, in the other photograph, I wanted to tell a story about drug abuse. We didn't want to go out and just sugar-coat the problem in the African American community. That's what makes "Songs of My

People" such an important record of history, because we went out and showed the problems in our community. There were some things that we didn't show. And I kick myself and I wish that we had more time—things that we should have shot over. But I wanted to tell this story about how drugs are destroying our community. Again, we could have went the quick way and had a photographer go to a Crackhouse and get a guy puffing on a pipe and all that—or shooting it in with a needle or something that you see so much. But what more dramatic way to tell that story than through a woman addicted to heroin and had been during her pregnancy, and just that innocent newborn child. And even in the book, we ran those two essays side-by-side—really to depict the emotion.

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

CHEERS: Also the theme of family—the homeless family. I thought it was important—and I give all credit due to Michael Fields a photo editor for "Songs of My People." When he saw my first pictures which I, quite honestly, thought I was finished shooting, he said, "Think about it. We always see this. We walk past the subways, down the street and we see somebody panhandling," but he said, "these 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 did that say? Even after the trauma—at the end of the day—what are they? Still a 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?

CHEERS: The AIDS story. We blew it. We had a photographer shoot it and the photographer did not do a good job on 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 did not deal with homosexuality in the African American community at all. Again, we had a photographer on it and the photographer did not do a good job the first time. There were assignments 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 this type of project. But what bothers me is—even with the incredible success of this project—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 black people don't support black people. Often you find art organizations and projects to be supported by large corporations. I'd like to see more black people taking an interest in art and 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?

CHEERS: What jumps out is when I go to the museums across the country 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 guard comes 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 back 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. It has to do with the response from the people because that's what the show is about. The show is about ordinary people doing ordinary things and extraordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Postscript: The show is on a 100-city tour across the United States and will return to the MFA, H, its permanent repository, in 1998.

Karen Gillen Allen is editor of SPOT.



Akin/Ludwig, Installation at HCP of *The Women Series*, 1995, gelatin silver prints, installation photo by Tish LeHew

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 Richter Sloan

Although much larger, the photographs are individually reminiscent of keepsakes—lockets or miniatures passed on as forget-me-nots 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 cat-gut bonds of family. Displayed against a dark brown wall in subdued lighting, the installation evokes the perfectly contrived poignancy of a Victorian sitting 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 Diptych 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 archaic 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

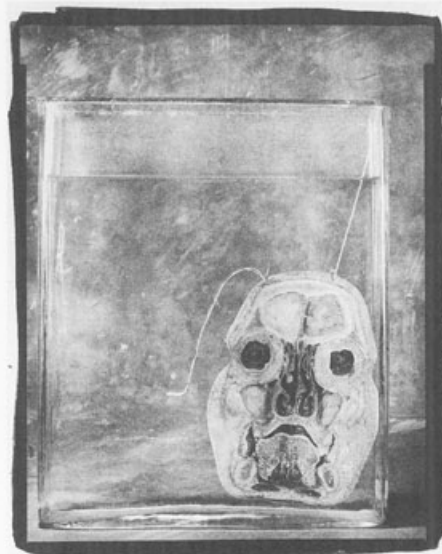
1800s until the 1920s—paid tribute to the richness and tonal value achieved by the early masters. Their work also acknowledged the irony of associating photography with the conventions of other art forms in which the artist's representation still dominated and the artist reigned supreme as sole author 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 exquisitely 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 the 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 loggerheads with the possibilities of the photographic process itself.

For these photographers, the notion of artistic primacy is as 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 easier," 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 many frames of reference within each piece—from the anonymous photographers of the images used in



Akin/Ludwig, *Sliced Face No. 2: Verso*, 1985, platinum print

their work to the viewers whose frame of reference they so actively seek to engage. This is particularly true of "The Diptych Series," where the parts of landscape fragments and portraits by anonymous photographers evoke, rather than present narrative content. The works are purely catalysts of a rich embroidery of emotion that change with each viewer.

But of course, Akin and Ludwig do not entirely fade into the background, and, inevitably, their choice of images gives rise to questions. Ludwig states that their current series is dominated by images of women because, "We found that, particularly in the early portraits, the women's faces were just more expressive. Men were trained not to show emotion. So the women's faces, we feel, have a greater power to move. But if the fact that they are all women evokes a particular sensibility in someone, we welcome it. We want people to feel like their aesthetic imaginations, however it happens, are addressed."

Lisa Richter Sloan is a freelance writer living and working in South Carolina.



Akin/Ludwig, *Diptych Series: No. 2*, 1993

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 extensive traveling retrospective of Salgado's work on manual labor which he began in 1986. At the Dallas Museum of Art the exhibition weaved its way through the museum's spaces: spilling out of rooms into the large passageway that connects the museum's wings and filling the central enclave 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 plaques 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 renown Magnum photo agency, they have their origins in; they're 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 spare white frames with the location and year printed in the corner of the matte.

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, perfume, and automobiles, the disassembling of cargo ships, the construction of the TGV Eurotunnel connecting France and England, and the firefighting of the Kuwaiti Oil fires, *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 depictions 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. If it's not mass Salgado frames, it's quantity and repetition—a landscape of bricks in Rajasthan, India, a mountain-side of Gold diggers in Serra Pelada, Brazil. Salgado shows manual labor as a David-and-Goliath-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.



Sebastião Salgado, *Shipbreaking, Bangladesh, 1989*

Yet there's a difference between representing people with pride and arguing 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 wage 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 surreal or otherworldly ambiance—sulfur-clouded landscapes in Java, oil-drenched 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 toil. 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 "sloppy 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

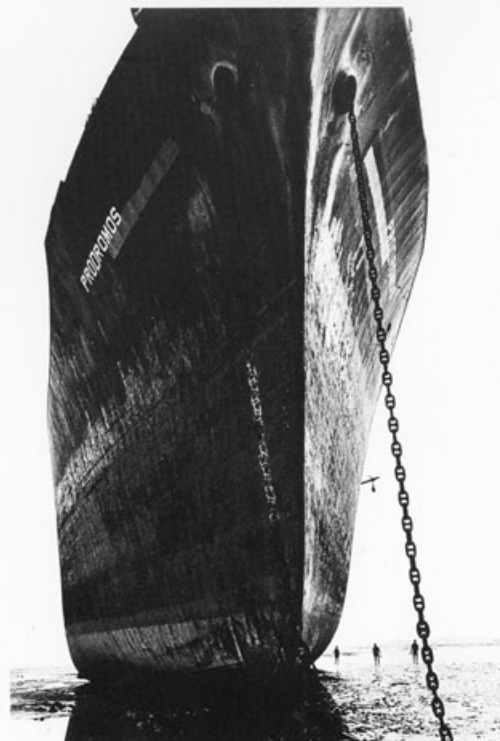
less loaded in that it does not directly draw attention to suffering, one may still question Salgado's methods and intentions. Consistently approaching his subjects as if armed with the New Vision, the photographs tend to be more potent as image than information. A favorite technique of Salgado's is 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 first sentence of the text that precedes the plates in the *Workers* publication, a more subjective, personalized account of these regions and labors written by the photographer and writer Eric Nepomuceno, they claim that "These photographs tell the story of an era." There's a certain pretension and self-importance in such a statement which one 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 economics 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 sidestepping the larger picture. Salgado and Nepomuceno state, "History is above all a succession of challenges, of repetitions, of perseverances. It is an 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, 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 a 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.



Sebastião Salgado, *Shipbreaking, Bangladesh, 1989*

HIDDEN MESSAGES

the camera i: Photographic Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection. Co-published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993

K. Johnson Bowles

A lavishly printed, visually appealing book, *the camera i: Photographic Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection* springs from the exhibition of the same name presented by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art following the couple's 1992 donation. This coffee-table book is comprised of 148 photographs, a biographical sketch on each artist, and an insightful essay by Deborah Irmas, photohistorian and daughter of Audrey and Sydney Irmas, and another dense, theoretical essay by Robert A. Sobieszek, curator of photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The images of the Irmas Collection were acquired beginning in the early 1980s and include works by nineteenth and twentieth century photographers. Deborah Irmas states that her parents' acquisition philosophy "[was] often determined by what was generally considered within the 'photographic community' (i.e., market, publishing, institutional) as worthy." Choices regarding the types of images chosen were also based on "particular yet personal notions of beauty and attraction. We made many quixotic and idiosyncratic choices, records of the changes in our taste over time."

Within the collection are many famous, and widely-reproduced photographs such as Edward Steichen's *Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette*, Paris, 1901; Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait (female persona)*, 1980; Bernice Abbott's *Portrait of the Author as a Young Woman*, c. 1930; and Joel-Peter Witkin's *Portrait of Joel*, 1984. [Work by Ansel Adams is not included in the volume though the inside flap synopsis mentions him.] A number of self-portraits refer to the artist's overall body of work through the inclusion of their models—William Wegman and Man Ray, Hans Bellmer and La Poupée (the doll), Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Lucy Belle Carter. There are also self-portraits that are an integral part of the artist's life work including those by Duane Michals, Cindy Sherman, Edward Muybridge, 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. Artist Paul Klee said "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible." And *Self-Portrait*, 1944, Man Ray (Emmanuel Rudnitsky) is a poignant example. As the viewer examines the image one finds in the left bottom corner a hand touching what is now understood to be a mirror image. Man Ray longingly touches his own reflection. The solitude implied is almost painful. The image seems to be a confession of the soul and a concentration of the artist's entire psyche. An equally timeless and eloquent self-portrait is Edward Sherriff Curtis' *Self-Portrait*, 1899 from the series "The North American Indian," 1907-30. His characteristically dignified gaze in soft



Paul Outerbridge Jr., *Untitled (Test Shot for 4 Rose Advertisement)*, circa 1938

focus with a tonal 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. His eyes are closed while he holds up a metal tray of flashlight powder that has just been ignited. He appears to offer up a victorious torch of spiritual inspiration. Bartholomew's engaging self-portrait is well-chosen for the book's cover.



Joel Peter Witkin, *Portrait of Joel*, 1984

Lighthearted and whimsical self-portraits resonate equally as the more serious and pensive. Henri Cartier-Bresson photographs his torso and foot while laying by the side of a road in Italy, 1932. A person walking down the road in the distance appears to be walking on top of Cartier-Bresson like the Lilliputian tying down Gulliver. Andy Warhol's serious mugging in a sequence of four Woolworth-type photobooth snapshots (*Untitled*, 1964) brings a nostalgic and knowing grin to the viewer's face. Louise Dahl Wolfe's awkward bending over to get underneath the viewing cloth of her camera, *Self-Portrait*, 1935 reveals a charming, self-deprecating sense of humor.

While the images presented are historically important, there is still a sense that something is missing. Perhaps it is that a vital part of the history of photo-

graphy, albeit contemporary photography, is missing. There are few images that address the body politic. Those included in the collection are the safely unsafe images of men dressed as women by Mapplethorpe and Pierre Molinier and the youthful nude bodies of Diane Arbus and Judy Dater.

With the exception of the exclusions mentioned above, the Irmas Collection does achieve the importance Deborah Irmas ascribes to it. She writes, "Individual works have a greater relevance within the context of the collection than they might have separate from it. Patterns emerge, similarities are noticed, and the subjects

appear again and again." Patterns and similarities are easily understood by the trained knowledgeable eye of one fortunate enough to hold various images side by side as Irmas has. However, the reader must flip back and forth between images and then back to the biographical information at the end of the book to actually find the image and to hopefully gain the same insight. It is a frustrating process because the images are

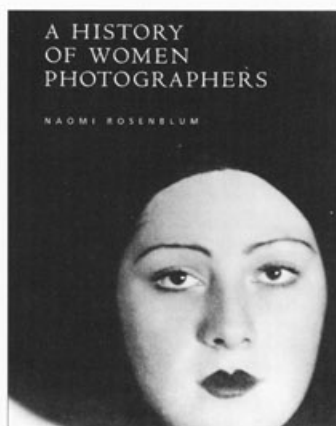
Self-Portrait in Mirrors, 1931 seem to be reproduced opposite one another solely because both photographers are looking through the lens and into a mirror. Lou Stoumen's *My Feet and Shoes*, Saylor's Lake, PA, 1935 and the Mehmed Fehmy Agha *Self-Portrait*, 1935 seem to be next to each other because they both have feet in them. In both pairings the emotional tone and content are discordant. It is perplexing since Irmas and Sobieszek 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 Irmas' 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? Something else? Can we gain insight into the character of the photographic activity (in the nineteenth or twentieth century) from self-portraits? And, are there perhaps other histories of photography different from the 'official' histories that might emerge from looking exclusively at self-portraits?" The answers are only hinted at in her text and the curator's text.

Unfortunately Robert Sobieszek's ideas about the nature of self-portraiture mostly float in a sea made turbid 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 Irmas poses. Sobieszek's theme of "comprehending the 'I' in self-portraiture is truly comprehending an 'other'" takes on a unintentional meaning for several of the self-portraits within a group. For example in Paul Outerbridge, Jr.'s *Untitled (Test Shot for 4 Rose Advertisement)* there are three men posing as conseed salesmen. Outerbridge could be any one of them. One might guess he is in the center. However, only from previous knowledge that Outerbridge has a mustache and dark hair is he 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 dissatisfying 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," Irmas writes. In the case of *the camera i* maybe the message is a bit too hidden in uninspired sequencing, tedious format, and incomplete background information to excite the quest for discovery of both the smaller and larger truths. This is regrettable for such a beautifully-produced book, interesting subject and significant photographic collection.

K. Johnson Bowles is an artist and director of the Moreau Galleries at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana.



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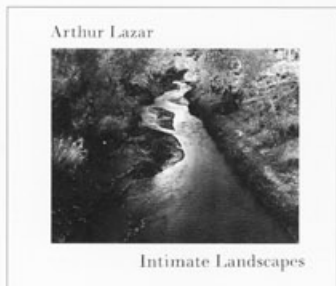
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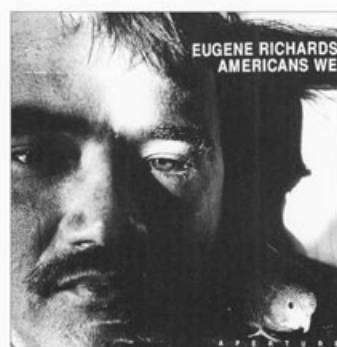
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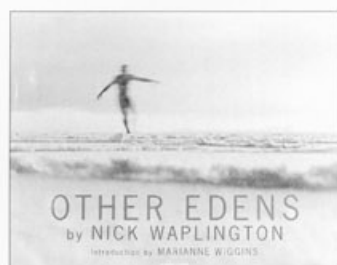
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Compiled by Juan Garcia and Thuy M. Tran

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 or understood, 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 freed from its ties to illustration. Why Lartigue or Steichen or Stieglitz or Penn hold one's attention in the exhibition is because they prepare one to consider the broader artistic questions that surround the politics of seeing.¹⁰

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

FOOTNOTES

1. Anne Hollander. *Seeing Through Clothes*. New York: Penguin Books, 1968/1978, p. 90.
2. Anthropologists define as "costume" the traditional garments, highly utilitarian and evolving slowly, worn by indigenous peoples to distinguish them from "fashion," those garments subject to rapid changes in style and sensibility which only a small group of the population in developed countries can afford. Fashion is more interested in conveying messages "beyond the power of the cloth itself to convey" (Hollander, p. 2). Irving Penn's images of the natives of Peru, posed against the same neutral backdrop of his fashion work, are

ironic comments on appropriating the techniques of one tradition to comment on another. Unfortunately, the exhibition's curator's provided no examples of Penn's work in the "anthropological" mode.

3. John Szarkowski's 1989 *Photography until Now* (New York: MOMA) includes only three fashion images.

4. Hollander, p. 5

5. Exhibition notes not printed in FotoFest Catalog

6. Naomi Wolf. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991, p. 15.

7. Exhibition notes not printed in FotoFest catalogue.

8. Their broad definition allowed Staley and Wise to include James Abbe's 1927 photograph of four dancers at the Folies Bergere, their ample fleshiness an ironic comment on the sleek, androgynous look in other photographs from the same period. Including Abbe allowed them, later in the exhibition, to include two examples of beefcake, Herb Ritts' campy *Fred: Body Shop* and Bruce Weber's examples of hyper-masculine and erotically charged photographs made to appeal to a homosexual audience. But their decision to include shifting definitions of "body types" was not well considered. While they seemed quite interested in pointing out androgynous representations of the body, they steered away from the types of images one finds in *Playboy*. There were no examples of male or female erotica. Or pornography. Nothing representing the huge corpus of Jim French or Rip Colt, two of the principal definers of gay iconography, was included. And, while presenting androgyny as a reigning style in the 1990s, the curators forgot that Anna Nicole Smith was working for Guess to link her own over-the-top sexiness with the manufacturer's product.

9. *Jessamine's Gown*, a 1994 photograph by Keith Carter shown recently at Houston's McMurtrey Gallery, and Marcia Lippman's work for the catalogue of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition "Madame Gres" avoid recognizing the problems of photographing clothing on a model by photographing the garments without models. The clothes carry themselves, eerily and suggestively, floating, and removed from the issues of display and representation.

10. Imagine how jarring the exhibition would have been had Staley and Wise included work of immigrants and laborers by Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. But such additions would have produced a completely different exhibition. As the show actually was hung, there were other noticeable absences. Nothing by Man Ray was exhibited. There were no examples of Dianne Arbus' work for *Vogue*. Charles Tracey's 1975 photograph of Calvin Klein jeans called for more examples of such "non-fashion" advertising work. Where were any of advertisements for the Gap? One would have appreciated the opportunity to see again Bruce Weber's legendary photo-essay of Calvin Klein, produced at Georgia O'Keeffe's studio and home in Abiqui, in which Klein indirectly fed rumors of an unnamed illness. Where were any examples of Weber's work for Polo/Ralph Lauren, work that would have benefited from being seen with the portrait of John Barrymore, which was on display, that seems to summarize the very quality inherent in Lauren's appeal to mass-market purchasers. Would not some of Weber's work for Calvin Klein jeans have benefited from being shown in the same exhibition that included Horst B. Horst's famous image of a model in a corset. Herb Ritts' portrait of Madonna seemed a peculiar choice since Steve Meisel's images from *Sex* (1993) were not shown. Had Paul Outerbridge's 1928 *Legs in Stockings* been included, then the dull, repetitive elements in Helmut Newton's images would have been even more apparent. Finally, one would have appreciated the opportunity to examine Robert Mapplethorpe's "fashion" work. While Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit* may have been too confrontational to show, it does question in a most direct manner the notion that "clothes make the man." Mapplethorpe's tamer but equally impressive images of Lisa Lyons, made for the 1982 exhibition "Intimate Architecture" at Massachusetts Institute of Technology are unlike anything seen in the exhibition.



Nancy Floyd, *At a young age she learns what stopping power is*, 1993



Judy Bankhead, *Fighting the Hand That Fed Them*, from the *instúdio* series, 1991

Parting Shots

Image as Issue

Mirroring our culture's voracious appetite for "televisual" 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 closeted 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 DeBusk and Pamela O. Pitt); generational differences in attitude towards womanhood (Adele 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, *Fitful Voyager*.

Chris Ballou

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