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A Tale of Two Cities

Chas Bowie

Of People & Buildings

A Tale of Two Cities is a quiet exhibition that museum-goers might pass through quickly, pausing at certain images, thinking that perhaps they recognized one of the 70-odd black-and-white prints in the show, and deciding that they were familiar with a different, similar photograph. The show is unassuming almost by definition: classic post-war street photography, architectural portraiture and meditative spiritual abstractions by a nearly unknown Japanese-American photographer. Looking closely at the work in the show, however, one finds a 50-year career on display, created by a photographic craftsman with razor-sharp eyes, whose nationalistic duality is subtly evident in his photographs of Chicago and Tokyo, his home cities.

Ishimoto's biography, an amalgam of influences and contradictions, is a good place to begin to understand his work. Most of the artist's life was divided (as is this exhibit) between Japan and the United States. Born in San Francisco in 1925, Ishimoto moved to Japan when Yasuhiro was three years old. As a young adult, Ishimoto returned to the U.S. and studied architecture and photography before being detained in a World War II internment camp for four years. In 1948, Ishimoto moved to Chicago to study photography with Harry Callahan at the Art Institute of Design, the state-side Bananas established by Lisak Mahney Naga, whose writings had deeply influenced Ishimoto as a student. This period in Chicago was a uniquely intellectual American scene, as Russian and European Bauhaus and International Style design and architecture minimally streamed its way into Chicago, influencing people such as Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind and Frank Lloyd Wright.

At this point, we have a young, American-born Japanese man whose primary interests are architecture and photography. Fresh out of American detainment, he is studying in an American bohemia of unadorned intelligentsia recently imported from behind the Iron Curtain. This is where A Tale of Two Cities picks up.

The opening suite of black-and-white photographs — three shadowy black and whites from Chicago, 1950, starts the show off right by simply and harmoniously incorporating the major photographic styles and themes that Ishimoto would pursue throughout his career: social document, human/architectural interaction, and a concentrated, meditative working style. The photographs record an ordinary, dreary city wall pierced together from wood panels that repeat upon themselves as they line the sidewalk. The wall runs at head level and is divided every three feet or so, creating a flat, modernist abstraction of perpendicular lines and blank urban rectangles. The shadows from the lampposts and street signs cast thick, blocky lines against the wall, crossing and countering the rigid formality of the wall's right angles. Ishimoto returns to the wall often, sometimes in the breaking morning sun, at other times after the day is nearly done: the shadows of the street life look heavy, resigned and flat against the grided wall. People pass by this shadow theater - pedestrians moving by quickly, leaving transient shadows that overlap and invade the static wall. Men walk by, triangular in their trench coats, legs pacing in sharp 90-degree angles. Their shadows mimic those of the signs and poles. They appear to have become assimilated with the landscape, to have assumed its structure and to have become assimilated to the structure of the street. Like the lampposts, the humans throw shadows.
that snap and break into perpendicular segments, and even the bird that flies across the scene is mirrored in the blotchy sidewalk stain below. Ishimoto returns to this wall repeatedly, watching the city and light change before him, slowly capturing the differences photographically.

The formal harmonies among the men, architecture and shadows in those images look like things that we as viewers have learned from modern dance, as the Chicago pedestrians were reacting to and interpreting the modern angularity of their surroundings. The strong shadowy black lines that traverse the pictures are notably calligraphic and predate Franz Kline's canvases by a number of years.

Ishimoto has pinpointed the dichotomy of the city in these images—the individual within a larger structure, an organic creation in a crafted container. For Ishimoto, the shadows of lamp posts become paintings on the walls of an urban cave.

Most of Ishimoto's street photography from the 1950s and 1960s are familiar to us, even if we have not seen his specific images before. They are exemplars of post-war American street photography that was being practiced in New York by Berenice Abbott, Robert Frank and, to a lesser degree, by Harry Callahan in Chicago. Most of the photography of this genre shows street life as a desolate urban experience in which individuals interact without ever connecting, a place where individuality is drowned by metropolitan crowds, pavement and automobiles. The themes generally run along the lines of alienation, form, disjunction and irony. To produce this sort of work requires an intuitive sense of action and eye and reflects quick enough to capture the formal harmonies of human alienation.

Like the 19th century Parisian flaneur, the street photographer is both coolly observant and deeply perceptive. Having spent so many years photographing the streets of Chicago and Tokyo, Ishimoto produced an incredible body of work in this genre, which unfortunately falls a bit flat by virtue of its collective familiarity. In Chicago, 1960, for instance, a young black girl in a white dress clutches an American flag in each hand, smiling at a trio of elderly women who gaze at her disgustedly.

As matterfully produced as this image is, it is difficult to remain surprised by these ironic nuggets of ugliness, no matter how well preserved on film. Logically, crowds are great fodder for this type of photography, and Ishimoto has worked the crowds as well, thrusting his wide angle lens into waves of people who brush shoulders without ever making eye contact. There are some fantastic images in this large chunk of Ishimoto's work; but to me, Ishimoto makes his best photographs when exploring the symbiosis of humans and buildings. Ishimoto's attention to portraiture is best defined by the relationship of structures and inhabitants.

In 1954, with the help of Edward Steichen, Ishimoto was the first person allowed to photograph Katsura Rikyô, a 17th century Japanese villa. For an entire month, Ishimoto shot daily in this bare, geometric, classical Japanese structure. Ishimoto focused on the spare lines in the architecture, the simple horizontal and vertical lines and the harmony of the building with the Japanese land. The absence of any decorative detail in the design and the sparseness of its functional aspects were astonishingly similar to the goals and practices of Western architects Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. The layers of cross-influences in this scenario are numbing, as the Chicagoans are influenced by the Europeans, who looked to the ancient Japanese structures. To have his black-and-white photographs interpreted the relationships between these ideologies produced none of the most famous architectural studies of all time.

For the past 20 years, Ishimoto has been looking at the ground more, creating close-up photographs of the surface of the earth, streets, snow and water. These photographs are exercises in harmony, and the concentration and meditation evidenced in the photographs lead me to refer to them as spiritual abstractions. Although some photographs near complete abstraction, in the light reflecting off water, others are more referential and retain his concerns of the interaction of people and the street, nature and structure. In Tokyo, 1989, a leaf lies on street stones, so wet that it seems to have melted into the street. Only the ghost of the leaf is visible, having assimilated with the stones. In Ishimoto's photographs, there is no street without the leaf, and the leaf does not exist as its own entity. As the cities are co-habitations of people and buildings, the leaf and the stone street combine to create a new entity, and the accumulation of history and experience piles upon itself—a transposition of time and a layering of the past. If the leaves then represent all the natural things that have come before and since the man-made structures, Ishimoto's images of footprints in the snow impair us all in his cyclical history. The shabby footprints become pathways, and like the leaf, they become consumed by the ground, so that they are the pathways allowed by all the people who have treaded these before. The street does not exist without the traces of the lives led upon them.

These lines have no place to be lived but on the streets and within the walls they create. The dynamics between the two create a unique push-and-pull relationship between man and wall, and eventually, the two become almost inseparable.
A Photographer's Perspective

Peter Goin

Eileen complains about sore knuckles and ten. She rubs her hands, over and over again. I am reminded of Shakespeare's familiar quote in Macbeth, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say! I am sick to death with thee... Why do you put in time to die? Heel is merry! Fie, my lord, fie!" Whether blood that stains the psyche or an aberrant immune system response, the ailment is incurable. The die is cast. Blood tests confirm the possible onset of rheumatoid arthritis. This rheumatic disease is world-wide and deadly. Only the afflicted truly understand a chronic disease accompanied by medical treatment.

"Do you believe in homeopathic medicine?" I ask.

My friend is a scientist, a linear thinker who believes in the promise and hope of science. "All things are possible," she responds quietly.

I let it go.

"Are you open to alternative forms of medicines?"

All long pauses before his hero goes, "Hummm... let's talk about something else.

As the brown hills of eastern Oregon pass for the window, I begin to examine the roots of the roots of landscape formation. I am not talking about Stephen J. Gould's distant vetting of geology that merely ignores human presence. Instead, I am trying to understand how humans have created the world in their own image. I offer to change the subject.

"Do you realize that mining is one of the most significant and influential technological forces that has shaped the landscape of my state, Nevada, means confronting mining as a dominant industry."

Uh, Mining? she is not impressed.

Clearly, environmentalists have stigmatized mining as an easy target. Who can blame them? The physical act of mining has been injurious to the vegetation, operations devastate fields and forests. When the ores are washed, the water poisons the streams and streams, destroying the fish or driving them away. Even the language of mining speaks of its devastation — blast, dump, crush, extract, spoil, waste and exhaust. EPA superfund sites, toxic waste designations, orange water and drowned stream banks offer silent testimony to the legacy of mining. There has been something sinister about the entire act of mining. No one entered the mine in civilized states until relatively modern times except as a prisoner of war, a criminal, or a slave. Mines became the first completely inorganic environment to be created and lived in by humans. Field and forest and stream and ocean are the environment of life; the mine is the environment of minerals and metals. Within the subterranean rock, there is no life. The face of the mine is shapeless, no friendly trees or plants to greet the eye. Daylight has been abolished, and the rhythms of the natural world altered. Continuous day and night production first came into existence in the mine. This is an environment of work, a colorless, tasteless and shapeless world.

Yet these same roots spawned an increase in global capitalism economy. Mining provides gold that is on a universal indicator for currency value. From the mine came not just reliable currency, but also the steam engine and locomotive, the elevator, the ventilating systems and the subway for urban transportation.

Civilization, as we know it, depends upon the mining economy.

"I think I need to do a book about mining."

I knew this. For many years, I have felt that the study of mining as a cultural landscape would be unpardonable. Many years ago, while working as a book buyer for a large, San Francisco bookstore, I noticed that people rarely bought books on mining. It is almost as if we prefer not to know.

"Who cares?" My friend's emphasis is not that people shouldn't care, but that the history of mining is a legacy of conquest and spoil. It's depressing.

But think of this. Mining is a major industry. Most books on mining focus on the evolution of the technology of mining or labor history. As an alternative, what about the role of the mine in developing a sense of place? What about the Radon Health Mines in Montana?

"The what?"

In 1974, during a period of ore exploration near Butte, Montana, a mining geologist stumbled upon an alleged health benefit from low-level exposure to radon. He noticed that a Los Angeles woman claimed that after several visits to one of the underground uranium mines, herburials disappeared. Brochures from the health mines proclaim that a stenophleboid of sufferers demanded access to the new defunct mines.

Radon is a naturally occurring, inert, colorless and tasteless element found in almost all types of rocks and soils. The aging or dissolution of radium forms radon gas. When inhaled, radon is easily absorbed into the blood stream. Radon enters the body in the three methods — direct inhalation, absorption through the skin in water baths and through ingesting radon in water. Anecdotal evidence suggests that radon gas has an activating effect on the endocrine gland system. Visitors to the mine claims relief from allergies, arthritis, bronchitis, gout, asthma, emphysema, lupus, sinusitis, fibromyalgia, carpal tunnel syndrome, enlarged prostate, eczema, psoriasis, headaches and from some symptoms of diabetes. Radioactive salts are alluded to lower blood pressure. Mine operators claim that a minimum number of 32 visits are necessary to allow the radon gas to start cleansing the body. Many visitors stay between 10 to 15 days to allow for the effects of mining to wash out. Each hour in the mine requires a three-hour interval.

I really believe in it," offers a relaxed but radioactive woman resting on a recycled couch deep within the Merry Widow Health Mine. At the Free Enterprise Health Mine, Phillips W. wrote, "I feel so great since our visits to the mine I just can't believe it! I've never had to take my pain medication since my return. The joint pains and terrible headaches and fatigue are a thing of the past. I got home and house-cleared like mad, figuring to do it while I felt so good, but I still feel good," I too wrote that "A year ago I couldn't dress myself or get out of the bathtub without help. My feet were so swollen I couldn't wear shoes. At first I felt like I didn't get any results from my time in the mine. But now I've been deer hunting, danced a couple of times and played my guitar. I can even type a little. We'll see you next year..." Anita M. wrote that, "So that I was skeptical would be quite a monumental understatement — desperate times call for desperate measures. I took 20 one-hour sessions underground in 1992. Five weeks passed. I began to notice an almost overwhelming sense of well being — even a feeling of strength — something foreign to me for the last 35 years. Living close by allows me regular attendance. In my opinion, God has given us each the opportunity to make an informed choice for this alternative to drug therapy." The health mines also offer therapy sessions for arthritis and pericarditis are available first come, first serve. Usually pets and barking dogs may be asked to leave. Donations are cheerfully accepted. All mines are smoke — and fragrance — free.

The drive from Portland, Oregon, to Butte, Montana, is long and tiring. Eileen agreed to accompany me — to model in the mines. I knew from researching the sites that many people are not willing to be photographed. For example, the Amish, who believe in homeopathic relief and attend the health mines in great numbers, do not want to be photographed. I needed a model.

I was glad that my friend agreed to come with me. I wanted the company. In other projects, I had been in harm's way at the Nevada Test Site, the Trinity site, the Hanford Nuclear Reservation and the Marshall Island sites of Bikini and Enewetak. Once again, I will be within a radioactive environment. This thought emerged again and again in my mind.

After all, it is difficult to believe that sitting on an old folding chair or recycled couch under heat lamps 85 feet below the surface in a damp mine radiating radon may be beneficial. After the first hour in the Sunshine Health mine, my breath passed the Geiger counter over the scale. The buzz
of the electrons was disturbing, and I can still vividly remember the staccato chatter.

"Stop worrying," a mine caretaker tried to reassure me. In areas of Africa, he offers, "... elephants, afflicted with arthritis, have been trails for hundreds of miles to radioactive ore outcrops to inhale radioactive gases rising from the earth fissures." I don't say anything.

Most of the people in the mines are children. Montana health officials have set voluntary guidelines that limit exposure to one-tenth of the federal standard for uraniferous miners. Pregnant women and children were restricted in 1988. "Howya feelin'?" A woman asks from the shadows. "Any better?" I am not entirely sure how to respond. "Wheddey doin'?" I begin to tell the story about my friend with the rheumatoid arthritis but before I can finish, my inquisitive mind knows only to hang in there it works.

Devotees speak of the healing mystery of radon with evangelical fervor. "This doctor told me once there was nothing they could do for me... at the mine for a few days, the pain in my hips and legs went away. My family and friends can't believe what they're seeing. I'm now able to clean and vacuum and many things I haven't done in years. I believe it is God's way of healing and I praise Him for it," writes Marke M. of Winnipeg, Radon users suspect that the medical and pharmaceutical industries covert high-priced practices and potions. They think that there is a conspiracy to keep people from knowing about the inexpensive radon remedy. Others simply believe that the mines are a poor man's resort where newly found friends get together for dinners and take side trips and just watch the sunset. "What can it hurt?" I am told. I tried to limit my visits to each of five mines according to the prescribed health formula — one hour in the mine and three hours out. I would start early in the morning — photograph for one hour and then wait for the next cycle. I would photograph throughout the day and night. The 24 hours provided time for climbing, hiking, sleeping, and preparing meals. I watched all the videoassists filled with earnest testimonials. I interviewed the mine operators. I photographed the exteriors of the mines. Then, after the timer buzzed, I went back into the mine.

But an hour is just not enough time. These mines are not easy to photograph. They are dark and damp, and each mine has many different light sources from fluorescent to quartz halogen to sodium vapor lights. Heat lamps combined with blue and green incandescent bulbs make the interiors of these mines colorful and surreal. Corners are abysmally dark. A few lamps are extremely bright, but without reflective surfaces, the lights fall off quickly. Many mine people are either suspicious or object to having their portraits made. When I set the tripod up in a room, people tend to leave. I am earnest in my explanations, but, after all, this is a media-savvy population. I can make the photographs, but getting model releases is another story. Some mine people don't care about how the photographs will be used; others remain skeptical. When people get up to leave, they must walk on wood planks down a narrow passageway. The tripod is set up on these wood planks and their departure inadvertently disturbs time exposures. Light meter readings are ineffective. The humidity fog the lenses.

Exposed bulbs reflect the apertures on the film. The field of view is extremely limited.

And after a day, even three hours' rest out of every four did not significantly reduce my radioactive breath. I tried conscious exhaling, so much so that I almost hyperventilated. I must have looked ridiculous to Oscar and Barbara as they calmly carried their towels into the dunk mines.

"What's wrong with him?" I overhear. Full of fear, Barbara said, quietly, but not that quietly.

Eileen's hair was still radioactive the next morning. I lost my ability to tell the difference between the increased humidity in the mine and my own sense of emotional fallout. While I know that radon is odorless, I swore that I could smell it. When I know that radon is tasteless, I avoided the water. After taking a shower, I realized that I had just immersed myself in a radioactive bath. Without it, I spit out as much saliva as I could bring into my mouth. Does boiling the water release the radon trapped in the water? We're here again, where we started. To relieve our pains, as many will see. We've been to the mine and feel much better. Bobby went down in an all-white sweater. Thanks the more exposed, the better. Give me a jacket, it's too cold for me! Been coining six years, missing only one. That again will never be done!

Bobby was in bad shape, he suffers with gout. We come to Free Enterprise to knock it out. The mineral water, we will always drink. It helps us also, so we thank it. — Bobby & Brenda S. The negatives flushed and time exposures made the mines visible. Eileen's rheumatoid arthritis has receded. Her breath is no longer radioactive. I am home. We need to have hope, and the idea of a health mine is more than an anecdotal expression of boys' effect. Perhaps the point is not whether the therapy actually works.

The idea of a health mine is hopeful. Uranium mines removed from the harmful paradigm of earth's destruction and exploitation and placed within the context of healing is truly remarkable. While it is clearly difficult to clinically prove the benefits of radon exposure, this symbol of a mine healing our bodies and ourselves opens the door to a different interpretation of the mine in western society. The testimonials continue.

Peter Ginn is a professor of art in photography and video at the University of Nevada, Reno. His photographs have been exhibited in more than 50 museums nationally and internationally, and he is the author of two books.

A previous version of this article appeared in Dicke-Take magazine, Spring 1999. It is taken from the collaborative project by Peter Ginn and Eilise Raymond that interprets the perception of mining environments. All photographs are by Peter Ginn, copyright 1998. All rights reserved.

The University of Texas Press published Humanistic by Peter Ginn in 1998, and the photographs were exhibited at the Houston Center for Photography in 1999. This article is Peter's research text for a chapter in a collaborative book to be released with C. Elizabeth Rosman's Mono-Changing Mines: An American underground development by George Thompson and the Center for American Places in Harrisonburg, Virginia.
Twenty Years ... 

REAL PICTURES 1970-1999
NIC NICOSIA
SEPTEMBER 24-NOVEMBER 25, 1999
CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM HOUSTON, TEXAS

Jacinda Russell

Nic Nicosia seduces his audience with rich, Cibachrome color and a 4x6, large-format slide Whether spotlighting a ballerina's private performance on top of a kitchen table or casting shadows on a fruit-laden tree, Nicosia uses light to create dramatic mood He constructs illusory stages, painting two-dimensional backgrounds to resemble three-dimensional spaces, then fills them with people whose presence alters the perspective even further He carefully controls every element within his camera's viewfinder the position of a chair, the tilt of a glass, the expressions on his participants' faces as well as their gestures -- creating complex compositions that border on chaos He knows all the technical tricks to make a photograph aesthetically sound Without Nicosia's elaborate preparation, the intricate details of the scenarios and the concentration on how it is photographed, Nicosia neglects to expand his no-year exploration of a singular idea His depictions of the basal abnormalities and sociological dysfunctions of middle-class suburbia do not penetrate further than the over-emphasized actions within the photograph and remain boring and contrived

Nicosia distorts typical notions of suburbia by exploring lust, violence and death These elements have the potential to effectively comment on the oddities found in the otherwise mundane underbelly of middle-class America, but the Contemporary Art Museum's survey lacks mystery, portraying incidents all too common to be abnor-

realistic. The following examples: In a suburb outside Dallas, pre-adolescent, bored children burn down a tree in a fenced backyard; a factory-vacant body, too deep to be-authentic, in a drainage canal; and a clown gives the finger to a couple of men in an automobile.

Nic Nicosia, Love + Lust #6, 1990. Original in color

replicating stereotypes that are not interesting.

The use of humor affects the interpretation of several of the pieces It often seems misplaced and in other instances, outrightly unmanned In Near Modern Disasters #8 (1983), three characters in an invisible gale hold on for life on a two-dimensional backdrop The hurricane force of the imagined wind virtually ends in tragedy yet the actors' exaggerated expressions indicate that this situation should be funny. Their joke, So It You Want To Be An Artist, ridicules the audience to the point of insult. The resulting laughter of a silhouetted man projected high above the viewers reverberates through the museum after he asks the rhetorical title question, creating an aura of confusion Nicosia claims that when he created the video he was asking himself the question The overall tone of the piece, however, implies his audience in making a wrong decision.

The series, Untitled (1991-1993), comes closest to thorough investigation of the underbelly of everyday definition gestures and movements overemphasized to the point of disbelief. The interactions between Wall's and Nicosia's characters are so few that the act of observing them deeply into the psyche of the people he portrays, causing viewers to think strongly about their own actions and their self awareness to art history adds to the multi-layered complexity of Wall's photography while Nicosia is known for his anachronistic scenes that do not penetrate beyond the climax portrayed before us.

Nic Nicosia's work flows from series to series to series to video, into a cohesive unit It is difficult to see where one series ends and the next begins. The montonous activity in the videos -- the camera as a passive observer in an otherwise active environment, boiling water on a kitchen stove, a child lying face-up on a bed, the camera as a subject in the scene, the camera watching its own surroundings -- all indicate Nicosia's interest in how the viewer perceives the scene.

The camera is more fully developed although their actions are still predictable. Staged photography is not a new venture into the medium. The late Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Nicosia's contemporaries Jeff Wall have effectively worked with arranging subjects, creating multilayered, fictitious narratives before the camera. Meatyard, who lived the middle-class life in suburban Kentucky, photographed his family in the 1960s wearing props, sometimes blurring his subjects beyond recognition. The juxtapositions made by his wife and children become villainous and disturbing as they stare calmly at the camera. He expanded his psychos by characters in his photographs by portraying the innocent as grotesque -- developing his reality through fabrication.

Nicosia's Untitled (Saint), 1986, from the Life As We Know It series depicts a young boy in vampire guise grimacing before a birthday party table of girls as a mother watches over in the background. He wears red, plastic fingernails and fake blood, displaying his fangs for all to see. His presence contrasts sharply with the girls dressed for a party as saintly heart-adorned tabards -- he is the overacting brother desiring attention and the ensuing mayhem -- the antag-

The photograph of the city's masked children, Nicosia's vampire boy wears a thin disguise. He is a stock character who offers a mirthless vision of the world.

Nic Nicosia, Untitled (Saint), 1986

Houston Center for Photography
Art and Commerce

IRVING PENN
A CAREER IN PHOTOGRAPHY
ORIGINATED BY THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
MARCH 25–JUNE 4, 2000
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS HOUSTON
HOUSTON, TEXAS

William R. Thompson

Few artists have negotiated the realms of art and commerce as successfully as photographer Irving Penn. For more than 50 years, Penn has received critical acclaim and lucrative assignments from magazines, designers and corporations. Yet throughout his prolific career—despite the fickleness of the fashion world, the demands of clients and consumers alike—he has never stopped growing artistically or investigating the limits of the photographic medium. While some photographers maintain strict separation between their commercial work and personal exploration, Penn has found inspiration in both and his imagery reflects a half-century-long dialogue between a highly marketable salesman and an introspective artist.

Penn's photography was one of a number of highlights at the inauguration of the Audrey Jones Beck Building of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, a grand, austere space designed by Spanish architect Rafael Moneo that opened to the public on March 25. On view in the lower level of the Beck Building, Irving Penn: A Career in Photography featured more than 100 of Penn's works from the late 1930s through the present. Although many of the photographs on view were vintage, others were later prints made from Penn's old negatives using the platinum palladium process, which produces rich, grainy tones as well as more durable images. Since 1935, Penn has reinterpreted much of his oeuvre in this way and fostered a new market for his work among collectors and museums. In the mid-1990s, Penn donated his archive to the Art Institute of Chicago, which catalogued the material and organized this traveling exhibition. Penn's alluring mix of glamour and stark modernism was an art director's dream for the MFAH's opening festivities.

One of the earliest photographs in the exhibition, Optician's Shop Window (c. 1939/printed 1980), which depicts an oversized pair of mock eyeglasses with two painted eyeballs for lenses, foreshadows several directions in Penn's later work, including his penchant for classical composition, unusual found objects and, of course, the visual language of advertising. Like many photographers in the 1930s, Penn fell under the influence of Surrealism, particularly the movement's preoccupation with unexpected juxtapositions and fragmented, contorted bodies. The glassy, unfurling eyelashes in Optician's Shop Window reappear in various forms throughout Penn's work. In Contact Lens (1981/printed 1983), a close-up of an anonymous model's eye to place a tinted contact lens on her eye, the photographer transforms her subject into an idealized abstraction of mascara, eye shadow and fingernail polish, while the viewer plays the role of squinting voyeur.

Penn's uncanny ability to make the familiar seem exotic was the dream of every fashion editor and advertiser and not surprisingly, he will forever be known for his early ground-breaking photographs for Vogue and other glossy magazines. This exhibition was generously peppered with signature examples of Penn's fashion work. Among these prints, Harlequin Dress (1950/printed 1979)—a portrait of Penn's wife, Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn, in a checkerboard-patterned dress—stands as a seminal image of post-war glamour. Poised within a neutral studio space and adorned with dark gloves, pearls and a cigarette, she looms before the viewer with steely immaculate grace, like a pyramid in the desert. Penn's love of formalism and mastery of black-and-white photography is evident in another well-known image from this era: Black and White Vogue Cover (1950/printed 1988), showing model Dovima Pachetti in a dark hat and dress with netting stretched over her face. She, like Fonssagrives-Penn, appears completely detached from the concerns of the commercial world, an image perfectly suited to selling the fantasy of high fashion. Penn's sharp modernist aesthetic was a refreshing change from the pomp and stiff formality found in the work of contemporaries such as Cecil Beaton and George Platt Lynes and his imagery helped redefine theook of fashion photography in the second half of the 20th century.

Penn's icy, idealized models sandaled in haute couture could not appear more different from the fluid, anonymous modes he photographed from 1949 to 1959 and exhibited in 1980 at the Marlborough Gallery in New York. In this series, Penn seemed to distance himself from the heavy artifice of the fashion industry and instead depicted the body in its most natural state. Closely cropped by the picture frame, these figures read as gently rolling landscapes or ancient Greco-Roman sculptures. Always one to experiment with the printing process, Penn used beech to soften the appearance of these photographs and to heighten their abstract qualities.

Models were not the only subjects to sit before Penn's camera. A master of portraiture, he has photographed hundreds of people, from avant-garde artists and celebrities to egg sellers and poultry cooks. In the 1940s, Penn often made the unusual props to divert the attention of his more imposing subjects. In 1947, he individually photographed Georgia O'Keefe, Marcel Duchamp, Martha Graham and other art world notables wedged between two angled theater flats. Gratifyingly, Penn began to focus more intensely on his subjects in jarring close-ups. In his portrait of Miles Davis from 1988, Penn captures the trumpeter's face, but instead on his weathered palm and fingers, posed as though playing his instrument. Penn's portraits of the indigenous people of Peru, New Guinea and Cameroon have often been categorized as "anthropological studies," but in reality they differ little from his commercial work. The subjects in Three Asaro Mud Menn (1979/printed 1984) are positioned in his trademark studio, divorced from their cultural context and perform for the camera like veteran fashion models.

Among Penn's most interesting and perhaps least appreciated works are his still lifes, particularly those addressing the subjects of death and decay. Laden with symbolism, these images have given Penn a venue for exploring themes usually denied him by his commercial assignments. The disintegrating cigarette butt in Cigarette No 69 (1979/printed 1987) appears all the more unsettling when compared to his sheets of tanta- lizing consumer goods. Likewise, the stacked human skulls in The Poor Lovers (1976/printed 1980) stand in sharp contrast to Penn's countless images of young faces in their prime, Fish Made of Fish (1939/printed 1981), a photograph of hundreds of tiny sardines arranged in the shape of a fish, is a captivating, whimsical reflection on the competitive nature of the food chain. Even the playfully balanced fruits and vegetables in Produce with String Beans (1977/printed 1993) take on a weighty air, wryly evoking the melancholy of 18th-century Dutch still lifes in which aging produce — the bounty of economic prosperity — becomes a metaphor for the transitory nature of life.


All photographs courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.
ARTWIRED INTERNATIONAL
MARCH 3–APRIL 8, 2000
O’KANE GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON – DOWNTOWN AND ART GALLERY/LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON – CLEARKLAKE HOUSTON, TEXAS

Johannes Birringer

A glimpse of the future! A foreboding of digital art exhibitions to come! ArtWired International’s casually suggestive invitation card displayed a glutinous close-up of an electrical socket, its holes smiling at the viewer with a friendly face as if the entrance to the wired world of the Internet promised a few good tales and a kiss. Or was this version of the smiley face a lighthearted crack at the heart of the context of the FotoFest’s International Month of Photography, the presence of digital images should come as no surprise. Surprising, rather, was the dearth of progressive video and interactive multimedia art installations amongst the sprawling set of exhibitions in the city of Houston.

With traditional fine art photography taking center stage, the question of photography’s relationship to the moving image media and the new computer-assisted and online artforms gained a specific critical momentum if we look at the curatorial challenges posed by media that cannot, or should not, be framed and hung in the traditional manner. FotoFest co-founders, Fred Saltz, president, and Wendy Watriss, artistic director, have in fact encouraged “breaking the frame” and extending photography’s reach to abandoned downtown buildings, storefronts, restaurants and the street, thus performing modest situational interventions into the urban infrastructure. The outcome of this can be debated because FotoFest’s curatorial agenda was hardly radical or detailed on particular urban, social or economic issues intrinsic to changing concepts of local and global public spheres. Rather, photography appeared to support the downtown revitalization, lending the business district artistic flair while generating its own map, so to speak, of a gigantic festival of images, shuttle service included (for the tourists). Committed to its mission, the festival also interacts with festivals elsewhere in an international consortium (FestivalUSA).

Tourism and education intertwined, the map of FotoFest 2000 directed the viewer to, potentially, more than 100 exhibition sites which, again potentially, could link diverse cultural communities through the flows of information and inspiration provided by the media. The map implies constant movement; it is a network of sites that is based on a conception of interfaces, communication, drifts and random access. In reality of course, each site “homes” art and locks it up, framing the prints and carefully hanging them under its spotlight.

I speculated that digital art could not possibly be compromised so disarmingly, as it is dependent on physical space and any museum space, ArtWired International was initiated and organized by Ann Trask (O’Kane Gallery/Downtown) and Martin Wink (Art Gallery, UH-Clearlake) and shown simultaneously at both locations featuring 51 artists (mostly from the U.S.), the show was juried by MANU-AL (Suzanne Bloom/Ed Hill), local artists who have experimented with digital media for many years; I do not know on what basis they selected the artists from the pool of 70 or 80 works that were submitted, but they posted a brief, modest note saying they attempted to show work that “illustrates our belief that so-called ‘digital art’ is as diverse in its manifestations as any art medium even though it is not, in fact, a distinct medium in itself.” Basically computers have allowed for the expansion of existing media by providing a whole new set of extremely powerful and exciting tools. The curators claim that the purpose of ArtWired International was “to acquaint the viewing public with new artforms and to give digital artists an opportunity to exhibit their work as it was intended to be seen.”

Unfortunately, no information was provided to acquaint the viewing public a bit more thoroughly with the contemporary contexts of digital culture, electronic imaging technologies, online art and various interactive design and installation practices. There was no information about the artists, their production processes, tools, platforms and output preferences. I suspect that perhaps none of their work would have liked the way their work was exhibited in Houston. The curators mention that the components of ArtWired included digital movies and CG animation, videotape, CD-ROMs, image files stored on ZIP disks or diskettes and “computer-generated prints.”

Some of the folders I was able to open included Real Mc files with detailed technical notes and specifications on how to install and execute the interactive programs. Not all of the programs worked.

The telecommunicating between the two galleries planned for the opening night had to be canceled. During my first visit, I found O’Kane Gallery closed but stumbled upon an Apple monitor in one of the offices. It told me “to follow the directions on the Clearlake campus library window.” Moreover, the still images from the show are accessible on a CD-ROM "catalogue" identical with the Director program running on the ArtWired Web site by Wink, clearkat.net/fotofest/ArtWired.html.

I find it hard to make sense of this exhibition project because it presents itself as a conceptual muddle while also betraying a lack of technological knowledge and aesthetic sensitivity towards electronic media. The latter would seem to be a basic pre-condition for mounting a successful and challenging exposition of "new artforms" while the conceptual differences between the cultures of the Internet (online art), interactive art and installation are fundamental for our understanding of the new interface conventions and the distributed content of digital art information. I will address these differences and the emerging parameters of interactivity as I offer models introductory to the aesthetic content of selected works from ArtWired. The experience of such content resides precisely in the different interfaces, and the curatorial shortcomings of ArtWired may perhaps be made productive if we reflect on the relations between old and new media and explore the distinctiveness of new digital parameters.

Digital Prints

The majority of the works displayed in ArtWired bears an obvious relationship to art photography’s production process, printing, framing and mode of presentation on the gallery wall, except that the "original" image material, captured on xerox black-and-white or color film,
dissolving into the next, making the exhibition as a whole appear to consist of layers upon layers upon layers of visual facets, virtual stories, a kind of graffiti that can be erased and reappear the next day. Conceptually, it is helpful to think of the entire room as digital information in a highly fluid state; these images don’t seem fixed like the older media or art objects. They don’t aspire to objecthood but are subject to change, further modification, conversion, and different output options, frames to be reframed, a part of the morphing motion-graphic space we encounter daily on the Internet. The digital evolution, to some extent, happens within the plasticity of the frame. Composing allows to seamlessly manipulate and bind elements within a frame that may come from radically separate sources. And as we learned from the fabricated special effects in Hollywood movies, we will grow accustomed to the emerging genre of fake documentaries and virtual

By Her Bachelors, Even ... More, and Barl Woodstrup/Matt Biederman’s Phlume added to the dreamy look of the 3-d format prints in O’Kane Gallery. The 3-d quality of the videos, implied in Summers’ digital animations, and the densely layered textures, superimposition and subliminal look of Pissance and Hildegarde, were barely perceptible due to the poor quality of the laser printed VHS tape. There were two attempts at 3-d installation, Kirkman’s Mothers, Daughters, Sisters (iris prints, inkjet printed books and cutout figures) and Pinkel’s Sissy/Unseen Guard at the L.A. County Museum. The latter added a pair of shoes on a box to the prints on the wall that resembled the leather and then tell us, with the pointed finger of a Hans Haeckel, about the plight of the gay truck drivers, Kirkman’s sophomoric, cute and books filled with lengthy private e-mail correspondences about illness in her family seemed no less embarrassing and self-indulgent. Finally, the curator’s decision to exhibit a video copy of one of the most interesting interactive CD-ROMs (Mondrian) made nonsense of the whole concept and design of interactive digital art. Interactive Media

Like Marilyn Walgour’s fascinating mini-malism animation piece, Nogashi, and Ron Geibert’s complex, mesmerizing and often hilarious double-speak interrogator e.1.5, Keith Roberson/Regina Frank’s Mondrian@Sea is executed as an interactive installation that invites the user to take time and investigate the visual and auditory structure of the work, trying out the feedback loop and the music and narrative associations it entertains. Nogashi is a small work, requiring less time to peruse than wandering hyper-text of Geibert’s double-speak that both delighted and angered me (when it got stuck or delayed in its strange “processing” logic of numbers and words). Browsing the works was done via the now utterly familiar mouse-and-keyboard interface at the PC. Apart from Geibert’s and Walgour’s, there were other interactive Direct Media movies and animations whose content I found less stimulating (Vonda Yurberg’s LogPrint; Sonya Wilhelm’s Little Brian: Robert Bowen’s New U.C. C, New You Don’t, or simply trivial (Rowell Angell’s Jack & Helen’s

Book of Changes and Fumiko Chino’s Cathery). The interactive installation for Mondrian@Sea, according to the artists, requires a video projector and a remote keyboard that functions like a musical instrument/encoding/demodulating device. If O’Kane’s work was simply dropped onto the little iMac desktop, thus altering the spatial distancing between “code” and image. When I enter its interactive parameter, I see a small white band of code running across a black field, and a gentle female voice beckons me to ask a question or give an answer. An “Hello, hey, type me, I’m hanging on your words, I can’t move without you”.

After hitting the keys, the scanned image of Caspar David Friedrich’s romantic painting which is mounted on the back wall at the vast ocean appears, his tiny figure dwarfed by the immensity of the horizon. Then the image dissolves, and I see Germaine Richier’s fragments, and performance artist Regina Frank, clad in a long black dress, standing on the bottom right of the projected screen. At this point, a fragment of her inserted on the left side shows her in the anguished twitching motion of a near-frozen frame—she is caught in the tiny space that is triggered by her gesture, her motion, trapped in what could appear to be an increasingly frightening existentialism, because I recognize as I begin to play with the keys, that I am in fact weaving the white band around her body and the computer’s mimetic film collage is beautiful. I notice the perpetual motion of the clouds on the right, and each time I hit the letters of the alphabet (spoken and sung as musical notes in Frank’s German voice), I move her tiny figure on the bottom right towards the center and then to the side window where her larger image is writhing like a captive prisoner. On the top of the landscape I see the swirling letters I, type both, in alphabetical language and in encryption (an older, World War II military ciphering communication code). In this concentrated space, as the drama unfolds, I barely have time to reflect; I become entranced with the music of a language I compose, and then suddenly, I hit a point when the transmission is corrupted. A warning signal appears and Frank unwinds from her tight band like a mechanical puppet, flown out into the sea. I pause to take stock of the associations that cross my mind, but there’s her voice again, like a siren call.” Hey, type me, I’m hanging on your words, I can’t move without you.” Online Art

I tried to hit him at the differences between static x-digital prints, digital video, x-d multimedia installations, interactive designs and the fluid culture of the Internet, and regrettably ArtWired neither included online art nor addressed some of the aesthetic and political questions of contemporary cyberculture. It thus missed a real opportunity to connect the fledgling local discourse on digital technology in the art to the wider world of net projects — inside and outside a given local exhibition — as well as the critical debates on new media art, electronic information copyright, random access and distributed content. The jurors, whose provocative if sometimes Orwellianized work on the boundaries of nature and digital culture (Time Out Of Jyne) was seen at Moody Gallery and who entertain a “Digital Image Forum” on their website, artfully placefully left the installation of ArtWired in the hands of inexperienced curators, with disastrous results; no one has ever had much luck with it. But at least it suggests that Fotosearch 2000 will probe the intersections of art and digital culture more deliberately.

Johannes Biringer is a choreographer/media artist and artistic director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in the author of Media and Performance: along the border of Line, Print, Text, Image, Video, and the Edge: Transformations of Culture (Athlone Press).

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realities, built bit by bit, from the computer’s software capabilities to render the fantastically real and to create things that in essence do not exist. These images have a screen life. I first saw ArtWired on the Web site, and then, in real life cases, I was perhaps provide with the URIs to visit the artists’ own sites on the Web. Instead, the galleries chose to present “hard copies” of the screen images. The physical installation of the works proved to be a letdown, partly because the output transfer to print (ink etc.) within the studio cases extreme. Saldana’s intriguing transfers to the quilt medium of cross-stitch linen) can weaken their projection to facilitate response to their emotional content. Other videos may work better in the trance-like environment of the technic club culture. Installation environments for digital art need to focus on the parameters of physical and psychological dependency that are stimulates if a work asks the user to become immersed and to navigate the sensory experiences within the sonic, tactile and visual interface. At ArtWired, little if any navigation design was explored. The muted presence in a single window of Vonda Yurberg’s Vision of Hildegard, Denis Summers’ The Bride Stripped Bare Book of Changes and Fumiko Chino’s Cathery. The interactive installation for Mondrian@Sea, according to the artists, requires a video projector and a keyboard that functions like a musical instrument/encoding/demodulating device. If O’Kane’s work was simply dropped onto the little iMac desktop, thus altering the spatial distancing between “code” and image. When I enter its interactive parameter, I see a small white band of code running across a black field, and a gentle female voice beckons me to ask a question or give an answer. An “Hello, hey, type me, I’m hanging on your words, I can’t move without you”.

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The Joy of Literacy

DENNIS FAGAN
FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 26, 2000
CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF HOUSTON
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Nancy Frankel

"LITERATURE IS NO ONE'S PRIVATE GROUND, LITERATURE IS COMMON GROUND, LET US TRAVEL FREELY AND FEARLESSLY AND FIND OUR OWN WAY FOR OURSELVES." — VIRGINIA WOOLF

As I was leaving Dennis Fagan's exhibit, Reading Rally, I realized that I could have written a description of the show without ever having seen it. I say this because I know firsthand how children respond when they listen to reading aloud and howful that response is. Fagan's work absolutely captures the emotions displayed by students when they begin to experience the joy of literacy. Fagan's work shows the sheer exuberance, heart-bursting pride and absolute enthralment with the printed page.

Since 1992, Fagan has volunteered to photograph the children of Zavala Elementary in Austin as they participate in their annual reading celebration and parade. Fagan explains that he hopes The Reading Rally exhibit will encourage all children to discover the "cool" and "joy" and "power" of reading.

In his artist's statement, Fagan enthusiastically describes his observations and participation in this annual event. (See sidebar)

In Desertal (1998) we see a child reading a book with great concentration. The boy's finger runs under the text; we all do this when the reading is challenging. We sense the effort and concentration the boy summons to understand the author's message. Other students are in the background involved in their own work. The children in the photograph are blurred; the printed page and the reader are the only parts in sharp focus.

Fagan seems to be reminding us that the only aspect of reading that remains constant is the author's words. The reader will grow, change and mature. The setting in which the work is read will always be different. Generation after generation of readers will be delighted in the work, not by the words on the printed page which will always remain the same.

As an adult whose professional focus is to help children learn to read, I cannot help but feel optimistic in viewing Dennis Fagan's photographs. This generous photographer not only captures the joy on a literate child's face but also places enough emphasis on this goal to make it a recurring subject — to share with others the need to help children learn to read.

For readers and future readers everywhere, Dennis Fagan has truly shared a great appreciation of the written word and of the importance of personal success.

Fagan succeeds in showing us the joy and pride young readers feel as they "creeply freely and fearlessly" into a good book. ☀

Nancy Frankel is a certified reading specialist who administers literacy programs for struggling readers in Cypress-Fairbanks I.S.D.

I love that one day a year when I get to shoot my photos at the Reading Rally. I've done it every year since 1992. The kids are always ruffled with excitement and joy waiting outside the school for the parade to start. They're clumped in groups under the slim trees in front of their school, while police officers clear the street and position their motorcycles to mark their place at the parade's front line.

The University of Texas cheerleaders and marching band get out of their busses to take their places behind those cops. Each bus is parked farther down the street among the little houses that line Robert Martinez Jr. Street.

Following behind the motorcycles and the UT contingent are desks of "exemplary" kids in convertibles and pickup trucks. Behind them, more kids organized by classroom proceed on foot, dressed in paper costumes that declare "Reading is Cool," or display names of favorite books and favorite characters. There are wide-eyed fifth-graders who have never heard a brass band before, let alone seen cops who weren't attending to some dark tragedy.

They march down the street turning onto Thiel and begin the circle that will take them between two federal housing projects and their own school and school yard. All this to celebrate reading, once a year, every spring, every Zavala kid.

The big noise and procession mark the most unusual approach to celebrating graduation from elementary school that I have ever witnessed. This approach has turned around what had been labeled one of the worst "performing" schools in this often impoverished state of Texas.

The kids end their parade at an outdoor stage behind the school. As their names are called, they come to collect the book awards or receive special recognition for their success.

In the middle of all this I make pictures, mostly make pictures. Some faces I know. Mostly I am surprised by the new faces that sprint from the crowd. Some kids are surprised at being photographed, others are oblivious to the camera, and still others welcome its attention.

Dennis Fagan
Flowing Waters, Wild Horses

SMOKE HORSES AND RIVER
DENNIS FAGAN
APRIL 1–MAY 7, 2000
GALVESTON ART CENTER
GALVESTON, TEXAS

Ileana Marcoulesco

Dennis Fagan does not make Nature into a backdrop to human action. While valuing childhood, family and friendships, when in nature, he is at one with it. The series, Horses and River, attest to his total immersion in the Spirit of the Horse and that of the Waters. It starts with Swan (2000): ruffled black feathers and classically curved neck; gliding as if on polished floors, barely indenting a ripple with its beak—the waterfood introduces the still waters. Rivers and their sand beaches appear solidified, in selenium grays, no turbulence, just intimated plant patterns, too obscure to decipher. Thus, Crossing I (1999) and Crossing II (1999) are pure play on shadows.

None of these minimal effects betray painstaking experiment; on the contrary, they flow easily from the "pen" of the artist. I would venture that he writes and narrates the scene, attentive to its literary, besides visual, qualities: not for nothing was Fagan's graduate work in writing and journalism.

At the conjunction of two streams in Don Rios (1998), a bunch of children with laughing faces styled as in retooched portraits, with flailing arms, show obvious delight in splashing about. The scene is conveyed in "Cartesian" manner, not in the least impressionistic, with the focus being on "realistic" narration; whereas, in the distance, a overloaded quadruped is slight to feel the river's fog. Here are the two modes of Fagan's photog

raphy combined: the narrative — clear and optimistic — of humans and the impressionistic clip of nature kept hazy, indeterminate.

John on Llanos (2000) brings the vivid presence of the artist's son: a boy in a plaid shirt, leaving his sandals on the bank of the river, gauging the distance before jumping in.

The artist's past work at a horse farm yields an abundance of other images. There is this ghostly anthropomorphism of horses. Fagan portrays them wild, even though they may be tame. Tje (1998) is a close-up of one, with white nose bridge and brilliant, piercing eye, who stands under a tree in bloom. The contrast of blacks and white flowery spots on the tree's crown lends it a god-like stance. Most other horses are rendered in blurred grayscale, reluctant to confess their secrets.

In Two Windows (1997): a horse is hardly projected between a small square of light and a huge luminous tear in the roof of the barn. Other images are of pure speed like Gaip (1998) — a rush through wind and mist of a disheveled sprinter. Speck Horse (1998) with the anguished eye of a haggard soul, embodies the icon of animal nenesis. No. 6 (1999) draws the rising skull of an immensely frightened animal whose violent neighing seems all-too-credible. Stallion (1998), wildly accented with charcoal, has a steadier, more satisfied and wiser look. Galastier (1997): perhaps the most intriguing piece in the show, features two white horse silhouettes bathed in a diffuse light, lovingly seeking for one another at an improbable angle. The well-studied asymmetric composition, obviously taken in stables complete with brick floors, wood post, metallic bars and stone piers, is loaded with emotion. May it be read as a symbol for love reaching across barriers? Together with the form of "organic minimalism," the main accomplishment of the show was the transmission of a contagious empathy with the living, in a strikingly novel form.

Ileana Marcoulesco is freelance philosopher and artist living and working in Houston.


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In an overall neutral fashion, Dingus, through his installation, used giant electronic plants originating in the twentieth century, as well as mimuscal additions to long-forgotten sites of archeological interest, pieces of ancient habitats, and geological structures. All are panoramic vistas achieved with a WideLux panoramic format, with curve- rature on the horizon. The artist sometimes even eradi- cates some of the colors, the severe, raw illumination of rooms where technologies are showcased, experimented with, and later deployed to the conceived machine, connected powerfully with the soft colors and the nebulous horizons in those rural places where the impact of technology is inci- dental or only marginal.

Dingus exhibits the same fundamental integrity as his predecessor, in the choice of frames as well as in the objective, un- constrained manner in which he juxtaposes them. But the drama underlying contemporary uses and misuse of technology, added to the choreography itself, is in this rather scant format, surprised in both intensity and formal effect his mentor’s vision.

Here are a few of the most un- usual photographs in this show: Solar Powered Home in Fog near Red- deer, CO (1999) expresses a mid-iron, the situation on a slope is modest, old- fashioned structure enclosed in a dense morning fog, and yet it claims to heat and cool itself by means of solar elements visi- ble on the roof. The irony may be mis- placed; apparently, however, the latest models of devices capturing solar energy have the power to extract and accumulate energy even under overcast skies; nevertheless, a work of art this photograph makes visible the contrast between high and low technology in a suggestive way.

Caged Core near Los Alamos, NM (1990) is a dusty pink view of an old Indian dwelling probably more than once defiled by impious visitors. The iron gate, a look alike of prison gates at the turn of the century, seems to muzzle the entrance, if not, as the artist himself thinks, to put a charity belt around it. Of course there is no way of deciding between these two functions of the "cage"; this indetermina- bility places the picture even more attractive with its mixture of poetry and the cruel limits imposed on it by civilization.

Similar in color and impression of vast loneliness are the two images of dams (Upper and Lower Elva River Dam, WA (1993)). Under the common title, Scheduled for Removal, they definite- ly point to the transience of technology: pride of builders and inhabitants alike one moment, become obsolete and victims of ecologically corrective demolition the next moment. In the Lower Elva River Dam photograph, the water tower is a strange, turn-of-the-century edifice sitting sim- ilar to a castle (the name for a water tower is, in French, Spanish and other Romance languages, "Water Castle", ... of an antici- pated beauty that makes its imminent razing even more poignant colors.

Recycled Beetle, Sweetville Zoo, Fort Collins, CO (1990) is a funny take of an abandoned car. It has some curved pipes, as on legs, looking like a sculpture of a giant insect hopping into the air.

Dan and Viewing Platform, Shoshone Fells, ID (1999) is a spectacular view of the falls in the majesty of an opulent and dangerous cascade, an outpouring of nat- ural violence. There is stark historic and visual contrast between this picture and the one immediately below it: the placed, if not deposing, photograph of the Statue of a Water Witcher, Waterville, WA (1990); the power cast shows a man searching for a water source with his old can- detector in the middle of a small town plaza paved with cobblestones.

A strong comment on human heebis is the photograph of the Movie Theatre, Picture Window, Mt. St. Helen’s Visitor Center (1999). The background of that the- ater has an enormous window, framed with red scalloped curtains, that opens on a view of Mount St. Helen’s with its smoking crater, as if the waner wanted it all costs to possess the sublime landscape forever, at least visually.

The most striking picture, however: After the Collapse, Crater Lake, OR (1999) is that of an extinguished volcano half-immerged in the deep blue waters of a lake. With the exception of the close-up of a marker explaining the geological phenomena to visitors, nothing is man- made in the subject of this picture. It emerges at the end — or the beginning — of a series to which it does and does not belong — a powerful outsider image — witness, as it were, to the entire exhibition.

The installation was quite thoughtful as far as gradation in intensity of colors and meanings is concerned. Also, by hav- ing the descriptive titles placed next to the pictures, it responded well to the need of the viewer to rapidly connect the visual artifact with the referent that localizes the scenes in time and geography, and thus makes far more intelligible the artistic intention.
REVIVAL
KATE BREEKEY
MARCH 3-APRIL 13, 2000
ORGANIZED BY
STEPHEN CLARK GALLERY, AUSTIN
708 MAIN AT CAPITOL
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Sharon Lynn

Artist Kate Breekey shows larger-than-life photographs of heads and torsos of dead birds, lizards and flowers from a series she calls Small Poetics. Each photograph is hand-painted in transparent oil washes, and then the details are redone by tracing each petal, or feather, or eyelash onto the image with colored pencils. In this series, begun in 1999, Breekey raises the dead.

The Danish writer Isak Dinesen (the Baroness Karen Blixen) who spent so much time in Africa told a story about admiring a fossil colored in diverse hues that were breathtaking and almost otherworldly. A friend of the writer killed the animal for her and had made a belt. Dinesen later regretted the death of the creature because in death it had lost its vibrancy and had become ugly.

Kate Breekey makes small dead things come alive. But she is more than a fine-art cosmetician. She endows the image to heroic proportions (12" x 18") that allow the viewer to see life up close, in a way rarely seen in nature, and then she washes and dries the life spirit of the thing onto the paper. It is in this way that she immortalizes her subject. And you can see that it is something other than color that makes the images come alive, in the two monotone photographs, White Horse (1977) (printed in 1990) and Accipiter Cooperi, Cooper’s Hawk (1949), demonstrate. Breekey says that it is in her attempt to examine the remains that she can comprehend what life is and therefore, also, what death is. "My friends and their friends give me small dead things as gifts. It is because they know that I will try to give them life."

Only one photograph in the series is of a living thing: the head entitled White Horse, which is neither small nor dead.

Says Breekey, "The photographs are not about just fresh dead birds and flowers but all states in the process of decomposition, disintegration — the whole transition into nothing. Soon they’ll be gone, they’ll be nothing."

"There are photographs of mumified birds that have left out the sun in the sun so the feathers are gone and the skin is like leather. And there are many skeletons."

Breekey has ties to Texas. She received an MFA from The University of Texas in Austin where she also held a faculty position in the department of photography until 1988. One day she walked into the Stephen L. Clark Gallery on West Sixth Street and bought a Keith Carter photograph. She told Clark she was a photographer and invited him to her studio to see her work. Clark, who represents other critically acclaimed photographers, like Mariana Ympoloski and Geoff Wimminham, says the hair on his arms stood on end when he saw Breekey’s work because he was so physically affected by the images.

She usually makes no more than 10 images are printed from one photograph. Because it takes time to diligently hand-color each image, there is a backlog of photographs to be finished for exhibition and for buyers. Breekey has painted only a small percentage of what she has photographed. Steve Clark says that there are lots of things sitting around in freezers all over Austin waiting for Kate to photograph them.

Says Breekey, "[Bill] Wittliff of the Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern and Mexican Photography at Southwest Texas University in San Marcos collects the skeletal pieces but dealers usually pick the pretty pieces, the colorful ones that will not offend an audience."

Sharon Lynn is a writer and editor and has collected art for more than 25 years.

Kathryn Aron

The beef industry is an enormous and important business in Argentina. As such, animal rights and working conditions are rarely questioned. But when Paul Luttringer sees fear in the animals’ eyes and the horror of the slaughter, she is reminded of her past. Luttringer’s exhibition, The Slaughterhouse, at the Houston Community College Art Gallery was one of the most meaningful, thought-provoking exhibitions mounted for Fotofest.

As a young woman, Paula was one of thousands of innocent Argentines who were kidnapped by the government and secretly imprisoned during the country’s civil war of the late 1970s. Like slaughterhouse procedures, the "Dirty War" was an unhappily atrocious set of events that most of the world would rather not know about.

Although she is visibly uncomfortable going into any detail about her incarceration, she does point out the close association between the frightened, caged cattle in the slaughterhouse and herself.

"When you are imprisoned, the only war you can fight is in your mind. … The project was a way to reorganize thoughts and deal with the memory."

Her carbon prints are beautiful, full of depth and texture, yet simultaneously grotesque due to the difficult theme. Blood-stained walls, limbs suspended from meat hooks and frightened cattle are inherently difficult to look at. But it is this delicate juxtaposition of technique and subject matter that have created a truly engaging and important body of work.

Luttringer, who now lives in France, only recently left her career as a gemologist to pursue photography. Her technical skill and deep, intuitive nature earns her a career worth following. Kudos to the Fotofest collaborators for bringing this emerging artist and her work to our attention. This is the kind of photography that galvanizes the medium.
CONTemporary Creative Photography From Korea

The ten photographers in this exhibition were all born after 1950 and came into their own during the 1980s. The exhibition presents the work of contemporary Korean photographers who distinguished themselves from the preceding generation of Korean photographers by looking at photography as art.” — Wendy Watriss

“...may be seen as a first and needed step for Korean photography, which does not yet have the international audience of Korean art and music. Fotofest 2000 is one of the first occasions in modern history, however, in which a group of contemporary Korean photographers will exhibit their work in the international art scene.” — Bohinchang Koo

A sense of loss, grief for the fallen and trepidation over the future are the concurrent themes running through the work of this new generation of Korean photographers.

The work of two photographers in particular reflect the emptiness of death and the loss of loved ones. In Bohinchang Koo’s series, Goodbye to Paradise, the photographer’s installation consists of insect specimen boxes but instead of squadrons of butterflies and legions of beetles, we see only their images, not the critters themselves. These images, printed on emulsion-coated rice paper, stripped out and stuck on pins suddenly take on all the poignancy of a reliquary of the dead.

In Sangil Lee’s graveyard photographs remembering the government’s massacre of protesters in Kwangju in 1980, we find ourselves standing before the grave of a young woman looking at us from her own photograph. Dressed in bridal regalia, she casts a serene and mournful presence as her photograph now learns against her own gravestone. In another print, a young man’s framed photo is encrusted with frost and streaked with dampness as his image fades from sight, if not from his family’s memory.

Not all of the work is as mournful as these two artists, as can be seen in Gachul Lee’s series entitled Han, a Korean expression reflecting “deep ancestral longing and sorrow.” Its arguably the most memorable and certainly the most often reproduced image throughout Fotofest. A lone monk stands with his back to the viewer atop an outcropping of rocks from which a foaming stream pours forth. As a work of subtlety and reverence, this image is phenomenally simple in staging, yet magnificent in its impact.

Bohinchang Koo, Portraits of Two, 1996. Gelatin silver print

Sangil Lee, Mongwadang, 1990. Gelatin silver print

Blenu Bae, Bonam, 1993. Gelatin silver print

Serrikyung Kim, Minwam Project, 1995. Cibachrome print, original in color

Gachul Lee, Untitled from the Series Han, 1996. Gelatin silver print

boxes that at their most expansive represent small tableaus and at their most confining contain only naked individuals. Five story-faced women in traditional garb fill one of Kim’s large Flexiglas boxes. But even in the photographer’s vivid Cibachrome print the women appear as little more than mannequins lending a human form to their quaint and ancient costumes.

The final images of Kim’s work were installed at Fotofest headquarters on Vine Street. Nudes in boxes suddenly become modern others d’art as they are placed in a boulevard crosswalks, installed in a snazzy home where they adorn the living spaces; even stacked outdoors as lawn art. Kim continues his symbolism with a man and woman seated at a restaurant table with two boxed nudes positioned behind them like potted plants or aquarium curios. But the real clicheism occurs when we see, with no subtlety at all, that the diners themselves are confined within their own larger box. Kim is suggesting, and no doubt most of his colleagues in this show would probably agree with his suggestion, that even affluence is no guarantee of escaping the greater cage that Korean society is creating for itself.

Chris Romeo is an MCP instructor and president of the Houston Photographic Society.

· Houston Center for Photography ·
THE ALLURE OF THE AUTOMATON’S GAZE

LUNAR LANDSCAPES: UNMANNED SPACE PHOTOGRAPHY
MARCH 1-JUNE 4, 2000
THE MENIL COLLECTION
HOUSTON, TEXAS

By the 17th century, astronomers like Galileo, with the help of telescopes, could map the surface of the moon with astonishing accuracy, even by today’s standards. But years later, as photography took root in the sciences with the help of people like William Bead and John Adams Whipple, it became a preferred way of knowing, the moon’s idiom of landscapes—huge deadlocked craters, dry ominous mountains and whole valleys of night. Photography and science begat an idealism, a geometry of dreams that would yield filmmaker George Melies’ 1902 comic exploit, A Trip to the Moon. This idea eventually propelled the development of the moon’s first explorers, the Soviet Lunas. In the words of one of its creators, V. Malynin, “man is born to discover our own life in the void of space.”

In the 19th century, photographers developed a vocabulary that fit poetic needs. But the poetry of these photographs, with titles as neutral as U.S. Surveyor VI Mission, spring from the binary logic of now outdated pieces of space debris.

Recently, we have been inundated with John Glenn’s rather prosaic return to space and the equally tepid exploits of Mir cruising around the outer horizon, events that have little consequence on the adventures of 32-year-olds mesmerized by the updated version of Game Boy. Even as adults, we are indifferent to the gray lunar body that arcs above us nightly, as if looking for the man in the moon is an instinctive act and the higher acts of past strong-jawed and fiercely American astronauts are the flotsam and jetsam of lowbrow cultural concerns. It is to man’s (and art’s) great credit to see us distill and recreate our past almost every day. These moon photos, however, are naked reminders. Though the moon is passe and Mars hangs above us as a highly sought space terminus, we once obsessed by the immense gray disc of the moon and the idea of landing in its dust.

But what humans can do themselves, they build an apparatus to do it for them.

david ensinger

Looking at early satellite photos of the moon leaves a viewer with a disembodiment of effect, one that does not recall Yuri Gagarin or Neil Armstrong, but a sense of dead space transmitted by cathode rays and TV cameras in the midst of an eerie era battered by race riots and Vietnam. Not only do the photos skirt the boundaries between history, technology and art, but leave the viewer asking, “Where is the human hand at work?”

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Recently, we have been inundated with John Glenn’s rather prosaic return to space and the equally tepid exploits of Mir cruising around the outer horizon, events that have little consequence on the adventures of 32-year-olds mesmerized by the updated version of Game Boy. Even as adults, we are indifferent to the gray lunar body that arcs above us nightly, as if looking for the man in the moon is an instinctive act and the higher acts of past strong-jawed and fiercely American astronauts are the flotsam and jetsam of lowbrow cultural concerns. It is to nature’s (and art’s) great credit to see us distill and recreate our past almost every day. These moon photos, however, are naked reminders. Though the moon is passe and Mars hangs above us as a highly sought space terminus, we once obsessed by the immense gray disc of the moon and the idea of landing in its dust.

What humans can do themselves, they build an apparatus to do it for them.
What a subdued year for photography in Texas. Between the 22 artist and 23 venues featured in this exhibition, the one visceral point of connection between artist and audience occasioned a harrowing, hazing piling of crucified cigarette packets in Jacinda Russel's mixed-media installation, Fear of Schizophrenia. This nexus is a scrap of brown paper marked with a handwritten admonition by the artist's schizophrenic Aunt Eleanor. It reads: "They're throwing at DriverWorks and the papers." The writing is bridlely, it possesses the purposeful purity of the thing-in-itself as if self-consciously and morally mounted to give it a professional appearance that belies its own perverted instinct for self-containment. The artist herself may have even fabricated the note, but at this moment the artist pulls her obsession into the world, and the world opens up to her obsession. Revealed by the scrap of paper, the ghost image of Aunt Eleanor appearing above and below the artist's own self-portraits show rise visually to the artist's fear of her own genetic inheritance and a sense of general menace. Just like Jacinda Russel's installation, the best experimental work in this exhibition share this outward movement from the art object to the outside world — the moment of uncertainty that resembles a sublime epiphany. The nearly unintelligible rush of voices in Bill Shackleford's audio tracks overpowers the actual sound of the speakers of convicted prisoners. However, as much as the prints move towards the distance of abstraction (through the enlargement of ballad-like patterns and rough painting), the voices keep the viewer/listener captive to the particular details and complaints of captives' acknowledgment of their plight. The relentless, Dorothea Doherty's photographic elegies succeed in escaping the linear narrative and the myth of history, as it is held by overlaying sets of resonant image stacks (fallen leaves, young women, cult of Demeter references) that a loose composition free of their stoic compositional values. Elsewhere, the exhibition contents itself with the dementia of cutesy and of central premise, the reversal of traditional gender biases in the presentation of art. To this end the artists are separated by gender, the women here, the men at the Art League of Houston. The exhibition succeeds on this count, the women benefit from the larger walls, insofar as their prints are either physically larger or their series more revealing than those of their male counterparts. This placement presumably abridges the men's work. The distinctions of scale with which the art world has traditionally sided the genders, men to the heroic, the women to the domestic, are here reversed. Unfortunately, very little of the photographs in the exhibition rise above the level of a supporting class in this curatorial argument. The video throwaway is a misleading demonstration. Jim Shelton's Beyond Babylon is a undergraduated film made from shot to shot, full of Western style showdowns and hanging down the affected road to a trick ending. Lana Moore goes the opposite route, taking too much time to relate an amusing family history during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which manages to speak of everything but culture or revolution. Despite the implications of the decision to separate the sexes, the works themselves are not particularly stringent in tone. On the contrary, they suffer from an overabundance of ambiency of niceness, and a vaguely sense of the technical art issues of the times. All of the photography is professional looking much of it is lightly experimental. The mood throughout the exhibition falls somewhere between the posed surface quirkiness of JohnFullbright's work and the domestic peace of the loving and inconsequential por- traits of Ken Hutch or Joseph Vitone. Digital manipulations, late conceptual serialism, installations, video works, light sculptures, hand-treated works, audio enhancements, the usual extra-media expansions are all present. What is lacking is urgency; the exhibition ambles along. Some artists to an artist to artists, with some of the artists over-represented, and others cut short. Many of the artists here have appropriated the look of conceptual documentation through the use of photographs that resemble supplements to larger projects, which, unfortunately, do not exist. Susan Spolder's Baby Book Series on self and extra racial adoption possess the sweetness and necessary nostalgia of the baby book form, but fails to redefining the form or expand its meaning beyond the personal. Kathy Lova's installation also makes mention of conceptual documents, beholding the photographic subject, the series is lovingly and cheerfully executed, the juxtaposition of her human sub- jects and the project row houses remains cryptic and unexpressive. Charlie Wiese's Baby Doll series also runs in either direction and half-lined a la Warhol and Lichtenstein, also convey little besides the artist's ten- dency toward those he loves. Brevity renders certain inclusions, such as Jimmy Castillo's look into his origins, impeccable. Castillo's identity trinity, on left to right a groomsman, a toy store and self-portrait set against a glossy blackboard filled with a chilly handwritten memo appears to have the promise to a more complete autobiography, the toys and text feel like interchangeable symbols in the contemporary mercurial market of kitsch. The brochure accompanying this exhibition features a different print by Castillo, one that makes a more charged statement by setting the artist between warping cow- boy and Indian figures. Presumably this is a nod to the artist's mixed blood heritage. Jack Thompson, Debra Rae and Robin Dru Germany also present kitsch- like works that are readable and home more evocative, whereas the icons Castillo uses (here as compared to the cowboy and Indian piece shown elsewhere) remain static; the latter group makes their pleasure known and staged gags speak. Kitsch and Pop Icons lend themselves to closer read- ings and external (to the art world) at least) allusions, because by themselves they are not very expressive. Used suc- cessfully, they reduce or subvert, or pulling high art down from its elitist cul- tural structures or exposing the ideologies behind mass-media artifacts. Debra Rae's 'security blankets' are given to prominence and career advance- ment but the doll is a cipher in the artist's trademark and her society themselves exist primarily as frames or backdrops for the social commentary. Robin Dru Germany appropriates the kitsch look of outdated icons, and uses her digital prints to offset the essential narra- tive question of gender. Similarly, Fanny Tepper's staged scenes mixing slapstick, humor and sex-conflict, fall somewhere between Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin. The most amusing works turn out to be the most engaging. O. Rufus Lovett's small portraits deliver more questions than insights. The series appears to be an enigmatic statement, a set of prints on the labels contradict the age expressed by the pictures, that of being babies. The artists tackle the idea of label through photography, outsmarting it, in a calculated image of a psychological digest. The sense of down-home synecdoche in the balloons, hands and ambiguous laughter, is undercut by the irreducible hum of life, a persistent ghost of its presence. Littered throughout this exhibition is the physical evidence of the 1990s — loose成员单位 curatorial and artistic choices that put forward the look of mainstream post-modernism, a lax, dis- passionate manner of historically cast- ing and grouping of the pieces. The many interesting possibilities of the exhibition's gender-specific organization remain largely unexplored; a curatorial shortcoming. The works are well-executed, but the in- tentions hidden. What is left is the overall feeling that what is going on isn't that important anymore. 

* Tex Konetsche is a creator at the Art Car Museum, the author of an upcoming collection of short stories, Dead Ends Looking for New Bedrooms, and a rock and roll bassist with the Last Jupette.
Highlights in Nordic Photography is an immense exhibition of over 120 works by 37 Scandinavian artists curated by Finn Tharne of the Museum for Fotokunst in Odense, Denmark. Fotofest sponsored its U.S. premiere in the Winter Street Art Center in Houston, Texas, a space as equally expansive and inspiring as the exhibition itself. It is a richly layered, in-depth look at an antique process, combining a classic form of printmaking with contemporary, late 20th century artistic philosophies and technologies.

Eli Ponsaa, a Danish graphic artist and photographer, discovered the photopolymer gravure plate in 1979 — an inexpensive, non-toxic alternative to the original photogravure copper printing method. The new plates, composed of soft plastic, light-sensitive material and thin sheet metal, were easy to use, thus lending itself to experimentation. The reemerging interest in exploring antique photographic processes and non-silver printing techniques in the 1990’s led the Museum for Fotokunst in Odense, Denmark, to invite artists from Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Greenland to work with Ponsaa’s new discovery. From 1990 through 1997, the 37 artists included in this exhibition perfected the technique by producing works that challenge both the photography and printmaking aesthetics.

The main strength in Highlights in Nordic Photography lies in the diversity of subject matter and style generated from artists in several disciplines: sculptors, painters and graphic designers worked alongside printmakers and photographers to create an unparalleled range of work in response to a singular technical process.

Peter Endal and Inger Line Raumussen used multiple sheets of Plexiglas, creating an architectural building of portraits and body parts. The translucent layers are encased in blocks of dark wood — free-standing altars to the persons they embody. Finn Naur Peteresen’s haunting portraits of children grown old way before their time — hollow-faced death camp images revisited — are punched out in the form of jigsaw puzzles. Even though they are displayed untouched and whole, they indicate temporary completeness — the fragility of being torn up at a moment’s notice and placed forgotten in a closet in the back of one’s mind.

By referencing the past in the recreation of the present and introducing current day issues of gender and examination of the self to historical art references, Rita Marthaug creates the strongest bridge in the combination of contemporary artistic philosophy and antique methods of printmaking. Her 66” x 27” self-portraits are layered over classical sculptures transforming male figures into that of her own female body as in the triptych L.O. 1-3 (1997). In Princes (1997), Marthaug’s uses the same layering techniques by posing her daughter as the little princess in Velasques’s Las meninas.

Highlights in Nordic Photography is an exhibition of great importance in the overview of 20th century photography. It not only documents the advances made since the show but removes photography from contemporary silver gelatin, chromo, cyanotype and ink jet printing, emphasizing the strengths of collaboration and the study of a multi-disciplinary medium.

Jacinda Russell is an artist living and working in Houston, Texas.
LINDA ORLOFF  
MARCH 3-APRIL 3, 2000  
VINE STREET STUDIOS  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

CHEMA MADOB AND NEIL MAUER  
MARCH 3-APRIL 3, 2000  
PURSE BUILDING STUDIOS  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Barrel B. Bullard

If Virginia Woolf had picked up a camera instead of a pen, traveled to Iceland, and then made her way into a darkroom in one of the country’s most consciousness-photographic images may have been the result. Linda Orloff, Danish photographer and one of this year’s Foto-First finds, was part of a three-woman exhibition with Linda Darling and Robin Hill entitled Installations. Held at the Vine Street Studios, the exhibit was a somewhat surreal exhibition of what cerebral venturing into some traditional, but primarily experimental photography.

Sage Bles (1996) and Amnesia (1995) are the two books from projects from which Orloff’s contribution to Installations is derived. Her images are haunting portrayals of what you might find if you had the ability to look inside the brain and observe it performing its visual function. Bits and snippets of random,有时离奇, visual imagery. Mental Polonoids.

Referring to the Polonoids that were initially part of the 1995 Amnesia exhibit, Orloff states that they are “pictures of remembrance and illusion.” The way silence is disturbed “for a short moment by a cross-section through the memory... I prefer to think that eventually in the book has a lot of layers behind and in front of them, like the way human beings are using their brain in so many layers and shifts at the same time. Developing the memory from the deep of oblivion bit by bit.

Linda Orloff’s work is ghostly and transparent, suggesting a temporal nature of mind and memory and their relation to the cyclonic nature of life. It has the mysterious quality of somehow representing the past, present and future simultaneously.

Madoz’s work occupied the left side of the gallery “stimulating” Mauer’s on the right. This mirroring imaging suggested a simple and straightforward representation; however, because Madoz’s work is strictly about composition, the arrangement appeared to mock a certain perplexity inherent in this seemingly direct work. He has also characterized elsewhere, in a solo show, as working in a surrealistic tradition of photography. President of the Xunta de Galicia, Manuel Frega Ibuey says, “Madoz’s images are populated by objects from everyday life, images that nonetheless evoke an unreal world, since they are manipulated with subjective intent, the product of a profoundly analytical way of seeing. Without ever falling into banality, his brilliant associations — not merely visual, but arising from a play of concepts — bring into question our very perception of reality.”

You might say he creates his images from opposites, using trickery; yet the work is thought-provoking for both its insight and its humor. His photographs sculptural ideas. In his untitled gelatin silver prints, he juxtaposes elements of life that would seem completely different, and yet, in typical surrealistic fashion, he is able to interweave them in provocative ways. A dining chair with a back made of suspenders, a cane serving as the handrail for a staircase, a pair of sandals with soles made from grass. Others works evolve a more philosophical or social interpretation: darts and a dart board with an image of constellations as its face, a yellow monkeyshin of neck and chest with a bike chain displayed as a necklace, an ant climbing the sands in an hourglass, and a water drain in the middle of a patch of cracked earth.

MOMENTS: THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHERS. A VISUAL CHRONICLE OF OUR TIME. COMPILED WITH TEXT BY S. J. MADAUS  
FOREWORD BY SEYMOUR TOLPPING  

Julianne Newton

Be forewarned. If you pause to ponder the visual and verbal content of this book, giving it the time it deserves, you will never view history or current affairs in the same way again.

But to get the full effect, you must read the book first. No matter how simple, you can never look at the pictures as if you can simply look at pictures such as these. But try looking into them, move beyond everyday symbols and images, and imagine what they portray. Give the content its due.

The second time, read the words — the introductory material as well as the individual vignettes describing the contents in which the pictures were made. On your third reading, with along the visual timeline, a path of additional pictures, words and dates that will help you locate the prize-winning photos in history.

Next, work back through the book, from start to finish, passing on each photo or group of photos to soak up bits of the larger context. Finally, on the fifth read, think critically as you scan the volume. Think about the content of the pictures, about the thrust of the timeline, about photojournalism, about societ

Excessive, you are thinking.

How many times have you re-read a poem or studied a painting, waiting for the work to open to you a little more each time, I ask. But this is not poetry or art, you are thinking. This is journalism. Depending on your opinion of journalism, you may inherently respect or disregard images of photojournalism. You cite examples of photographs that have been manipulated, that misled, that tell only part of a truth, that were published primarily because of color or aesthetic appeal. The fact that the best images of photojournalism increasingly find their way to the walls of art spaces, a little more convincing of their worth, much less their authenticity.

I suggest that you approach these photographs from a perspective outside the frames of your past perceptions of journalism and art. The photographs in the 1999 edition of Moments: The Pulitzer Prize-Winning Photographers, deserve far more of your consideration than a quick dismiss based on the rationales of subjective perception and media manipulation. Subtitled A Visual Chronicle of Our Time, these words and pictures tell significant stories, both large and small. They define the essential moments of the last half of the 20th century and the 20th century. They define the vision photographers, editors and each year’s Pulitzer Prize committee decided was important. And that very vision has framed the way we have lived and remember events of the 20th century. That alone makes them worth of thoughtful reading.

But there is far more to learn from sitting with a while with this book. Compiled by a master editor of 20th century photo-
journalism. Moments provides remarkable fodder for discussing the significant issues of vision and reality facing the global citizenry in the 21st century. How does photojournalism influence our understanding of world events? How does photojournalism affect what we remember about these events? Should certain photographs have been taken or published? Had they not been taken or published, would history be different? What factors determine whether we see a picture or remember it at all? What will the revised Moments published in the year 2050 say about our current photojournalistic and visual culture because we no longer believe in photographs? Or a compendium of images chronicling the 21st century with the dedication and integrative force made clear by this current volume? The book is well done: quality reproduction of black-and-white and color, quickly readable vignettes about the photos and photographers, careful design to give the best possible work exhibited, clear use of type and white space. One particularly interesting characteristic is that no captions accompany the photographs. At first, I found the idea refreshing; the viewer must look at the photos more carefully to discern their narratives. The pictures must speak for themselves. This requires that we have been trained by the draw of works new to an incredible image, even the tiny titles peculiar to on their subsequent works exhibited in museums. The habit of turning quickly to caption material led me to be similarly annoyed when my eyes moved quickly to the bold-faced technical information located near each major photo. For clarification and background, text is much fuller than a caption describes how the photos came about.

Written and compiled by veteran Associated Press executive Hal Buell, we can trust the validity of the material. The foreword by Seymour Topping, who admires the Pulitzer Prizes and is professor of international journalism at Columbia University, offers a brief but informative background on the Pulitzer's beginning, major changes in the selection process and the development. Buell's introduction takes the difficult question, "What is it that makes a Pulitzer Prize picture?" The Pulitzer requirements are straightforward: "The photo, or photos, must have been published in a daily newspaper in the United States and must have been made in the calendar year prior to the year of the award." Buell notes, however, that the rules "offer no guidance about content picture, historical significance, technical skill, journalistic experience, or cultural impact." The pictures vary in black-and-white and color, and the exchange between people, from surprising historical events to the quiet reflection of everyday life, from high drama to subtle observations, to photographs of moments that signal what an amateur would call "interesting." The year that many of the images were published, 1986, was rich with significant events. To me, the book is more than a compendium of images, it is a historical record of the 1980s, and a celebration of the power of photography.

In light of the vast diversity of images, one must say that the Pulitzer-winning photographs by and large document universal human behaviors in the past 30 years. They lead us to see us otherwise than we have seen. Frequently they are the chapter headings of history. Too often they are no more than documentation of the more likely to be written in blood than beauty. But the Pulitzer catalogue also contains the danger of a lost photograph. We lose these moments that each of us encounters individually, those sweet, gentle insights that separate us from the routine of our lives. Shared through photography, these pictures also become universal.

Buell divides the book into four major photographic sections: The Large Format Camera and the Early Pulitzers; The Small Camera and the Vietnam and Civil Rights Pulitzer; The New Kind of Pulitzer: The Picture Story; and Color and Digital Photography. Women Photographers and the Africa Pulitzer. These categories alone provide a means for analyzing the course of photojournalism in the 20th century. Increased awareness of personal in the past has led to the emergence of an experienced photojournalist, walking around Saigon, camera gear in tow, living among the people and the events. The moment is enough to make a photojournalist want to move away from the camera and make an exposure of the wretched sailor whose eyes spoke volumes. The viewfinder and his expression reflecting the woeful news that there was no water. Though the "indian sailors were never seen again," Noel and his wife of over 50 years later, he cannot deny that female genital mutilation occurred, that babies died in the Oklahoma bombing, that a fire escape collapsed with a woman and child or that such pictures can make a difference. The book is a reminder that advertising or the fantasy of entertainment can touch the profound reality of what actually happens in the course of people's lives. The photographs are made by imperfect human beings using various forms of recording technology — which will continue to change — and individual points of view which will also change. However, the goal is the same: to report to the world the happenings of life and death as best as humanity possibly. The only alternative is not to see at all.

Nicholas Nixon, _The Brown Sisters, 1975_. Germaine Grier print

**THE BROWN SISTERS**

**PIRAGGED—GROUPED BY NICHOLAS NIXON**

**AFTERWORD BY PETER GALASSI**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, 1999**

**Peter Brown**

This is a mesmerizing book. I have left it around various vacation homes over the past few weeks, and family and friends — particularly, those in their 40s or 50s, pick it up, sit down, drift into it as if it were a dream, and do not re-emerge until they are awoken by something in the present.

Generally, most people do not react to photographic books in this way. More often than not, there is a swift riffing of pages from back to front (a sweep that often dings up the reproductions), a few glasses, three or four long stanzas, and then that paled-look, upwards, blank, maybe thinking, maybe a little irritated. But down goes the book. Finished.

Not so this time. The Brown sisters get questions, brown, many smilies, knowings, odd feelings of some kind of connection that is almost the body equivalent to that of listening to sala music — and this bellowing and weeping goes on, oblivious to all surroundings.

Like many, I have been aware of Nicho- lus Nixon’s long-term portrait project with the Brown sisters. The photographs have been shown singly and in small groups in many places over time, but have not, to my knowledge, been exhibited or published in such quantity before. (Twenty-five years and the cusp of a new millennium are good places to pause and reflect.)

These sisters — Heather, Mimi, Bebe (Nixon’s wife) and Laurie have been photog- raphed together, standing in the same order, annually (one chosen photograph a year) for the past quarter century. An 8 x 10” view camera (a beautiful, bulky machine mounted on a tripod) and black-and-white film have been used, as they have in Nixon’s past work.

The portraits, which are varied in place and season, have, in their early stages, a cool if not discomfiting dis- tance about them as the series progresses, a mix of intensity, care, warmth, and indifference drift from year to year, and from face to face, until a desensitization that the sisters share with each other, and ultimately with the viewer, becomes paramount. The photographs are of interest individually but come into power when viewed as sequence. And in some ways, they are as compelling for what they are not as for what they are.

What they do show, and what seldom fails to intrigue those who pick up the book, is the sight of a small group of our contemporaries aging before our eyes. These are beautiful and, as Nixon says in his short acknowledgments, “strong” women. Their faces are not “seen” in the word which swirls with glue throughout this book) to be members of a family reading along, for each of us would be counted. A poet friend of mine, an only child (like Nixon), after finishing the book, looked at me with the eyes of a woman more than a little chateau by life and said in the voice of a small girl, “I want to be one of them! I want them for me!”

What do we know about these women? Not much. Really, at bedrock, we understand what they have looked like for fractions of 35 specific seconds over the course of 25 years. We also know that there are four of them — a fact remark- ably in its own right. I am 51 and have known only one other “four-tendered” family in that time. There is an age dif- ference between the sisters: I am the middle and youngest, with the series beginning in 1974 when Mimi was 15 and Bebe 34. The sisters are careful and tastefully dressed, though in casual ways, with Mimi, the youngest, being the most maverick in terms of style. She alone appears preg- nant (in the 1992 photographs), the only obvious pregnancy. The fair-skinned Bebe, the eldest, seems to have aged the most in conventional ways (though in the last few years she seems to have turned back the clock). The sisters are photographed with little identifiable background — though beach, ocean rocks, shrubbery, leaves and, a couple of times, a wall make their presence known in the background. The photographs are taken most often during the summer. We seem to be on the East Coast, and the sis- ters seem to be middle or upper middle class Fasterers — but perhaps not. In some photographs they hold each other, in others they are more separate, and in some seem (as a set of quotes) Their facial expressions vary, but in the earliest photographs seem to more strongly con- firm the viewer than in the more recent images that end the book. And there are many facts of dress, hairstyle and pos- ture that would be of interest to a cultural anthropologist (facts that will increase in power over time), but facts that the rest of an interpret in spontaneous ways.

Peter Galassi’s Afterword fills in more, but not much: a college graduation after which the photographs began in earnest;

from image to image, as Nixon’s camera moved in front of the sisters, changing its line of view, ratcheting up and down, mowing back and forth, but always throwing a shadow over the four — but even this timelimiting in a photograph that is mostly about the making of the camera creating a specific mix, a structure that might be construed as intimate, domi- nant, careful, mysterious, almost a construct that, among other things, might create a mood or a set of interpretive feel- ings. I found myself looking at this struc- ture and the way the sisters sometimes centered, sometimes not, sometimes cropped on one side or another (a leg, an arm, a finger, a face) — or almost all, oc- casional less distortion (which can give a creepy, menacing quality), at the varied light that Nixon is interested in (normally a sensual part of his work) — on occasion, its draft; lack at the intermit- tent use of flash; at the various ways the women fit into the frame, sometimes their own faces, rocks, sky; at the mix of tonal values (their beauty, derived from the 8 x 10” contact prints from which these reproductions were made); the lack of grain; the intimate size of the book; the sisters’ eye contact with the lens; and so on. And while this book is well illustrated and well written, it grows somewhat pale because of the human content of the photographs. These are multi-layered pictures of personal memory and we want to make more of them than a formalist might; though on formalist scores, it should be noted that Nixon has worked with large-format cameras in the street, at home and in a variety of hospitals and schools for years, and with remarkable dexter- ity. And while these portraits are more studied and compositionally dec- trinat than most of his other work, lyrical four- sines of face and background are still a motive force — al- though in a kind of minimalist fashion.

Second, one might argue that the book’s photographs are of a group of blenders and look at the book just as pictures of these particular women, again without metaphoric thought — just con- sider the “laws” of their faces and poses — (though again, we don’t know the full story). We do understand quickly what these people are up to, however, and wished (somewhat grumpily that I had had the forethought to do the same with my own family. Anyone could create something roughly equivalent with a point-and-shoot (though again not as far reaching or beautiful), but still, a few hours at most, once a year, and a resonant record would exist. What else is there? In an expanding order of my own interpretive list, I would dispense, at least momentarily, with the questions of back- ground and look at the images simply as visual material, non-metaphoric and unladen by content; simply the facts of those photographic facts. I found that, as a photographer, and with some difficulty, I could examine the photos as I might a hyperrealist painting of a shop front, say, just ferreting out information. I watched,
our own lives. And there is a sweet intimacy to this that we all attend to and appreciate — as well as a mute tenderness and vulnerability from which other issues spring. Grossly oversimplified: the expressive stances of the sisters move (in varying degrees) from some symbolic postures taken in the seventies, which can be read, either as an immediate reaction to the connotations of photography — or, more interesting perhaps, as having been generated by these particular times, set in response to a configuration of cultural expectations: generational politics, patriarchal and feminist issues particularly, but also a wide variety of unfocused social and immediate photographic concerns. Each woman seems, in general, more alone than a part of the group, yet still hangs onto a great deal of self-sufficiency. The look and feel of the gentler aspects of Judy Dater’s early work comes to mind as a parallel. In the eighties, in fact, a genre of photographic speaking develops between the sisters, yet still, a somewhat confrontational stance is taken in regard to the outside — not a lot of smiling, but arms linked, a steadfast strong presence, apparent not less as individuals and more as a group. And in the nineties, like the two who started off the way they are, however, is a visible warmth and a diffident but resolute peace — just look at these two faces now. The sisters age for a quarter of a century in a matter of minutes and these women though changed are still beautiful and in deep, this strength is lost. When they are young, they greet us openly, if mysteriously, and the bend between them is profound (as is the courage) that they show in allowing us to watch them age in this era of perpetual youth.

A cloaked and absurdly rushed as this synopsis may sound, the cumulative effect is very moving. To witness, as confronted, strong, low, and wisdom combine, in individuals, in a group and in this group’s relation to the outside, is remarkably in its own right. Yet it’s also an experimental that can help one review one’s own past and the lives of one’s loved ones.

To some degree, all of this is, of course, a kind of controlled and unscreened passage. But in viewing the book again and again, this multifaceted chorus of images becomes pin to beautiful is beautiful to watch.

One can try to decipher the series by reading the book in more ways — but this is a difficult job. The sisters’ postures, expressions, clothing, and various on-camera roles — as sisters, individual, symbolic forces — have been formed by an enormous mix of personal and cultural forces. The worlds of sibling politics, the wider family, the lives of women in strongly feminine times, the inner-workings of the art world, the inconsistencies of the moment are all at play. And there is so much more.

Hundreds of variables and thoughts and questions, times four, inform the creation of this book. And this does not include the input from Nixon, which is considerable. Once his decisions are factored in, we enter an intricate set of amputations and influences by the sixties to arrive at the web of cross-currents that create the book’s infrastructure. All of which is to say, they are not to divine in credible ways, the reason that one sister looks plucked for example in 1995 and is vaguely troubled in 1996, say, is a given the information that we possess, beyond thought.

(And again, we have Nixon, the wild card, who in making his and or 12 negatives a year, affords himself an interesting choice as editor of this work. How do his interpretations affect the soul of the series?) Finally, I give up trying to recreate biography from these images and move on to fiction, or at least a non-fiction novel, projecting first into the future (thoughts of aging and death) by crafting another nature go hand in hand) and wonder where these women will be in another 25 years, 50 years.

Which leads to the fourth, and to me, the most enjoyable way to consider this book: just let your imagination run rampant. Flip the pages and follow your heart, change her hairstyle, consider the remarkable intensity of Bebe and wonder if that’s Lake Michigan or the Chesapeake Bay or Maine... think of the cousins playing tag in the background. Think of the poor husband, talking among themselves as the courageous, when they showed in allowing us to watch them age in this era of perpetual youth.


Keaton presents a consideration of 79 unusual after images on bi-fold images on the darker side of the City of Angels.


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Presents a visual history that demonstrates the contested terms of American identity.


Hempho’s photographs of Chicago and Tokyo bring together two cities of two different cultures.

Compiled by Sarina DeNanana

BOOKS RECEIVED AND NOTED

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Features 350 photographs spanning more than 80 years of Brandt’s career. It includes an introduction by David Hockney, and essays by Bill Jay and Nigel Worrall.


Bogdan joins text with illustrations to develop skecthes of these pioneer photographers on the Adaklauks, its inhabitants and visitors.


Presents a series of portraits of people in helita.


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