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spot

Spring 2006  
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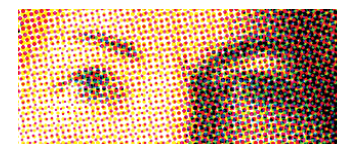
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# In this Issue



In this Spring 2006 issue, we introduce two exciting new sections—the *SPOT Portfolio* and the *SPOT Project*. Our *Portfolio* section features a suite of photo-based artwork by a single artist (or collaborative group); the *Project* section offers an exhibition “space” using the pages of the magazine. Projects can take advantage of our full-color pages and can incorporate written text (poetry, prose, or otherwise). *SPOT Project* contributors will have the opportunity to consult with our designer and editorial team as needed. We welcome proposals for both sections. (Proposals for our next issue are needed by May 1st in order to appear in the October 2006 issue.)

This issue also features new work by photographers from Portugal via London (Edgar Martins), New Orleans (Jane Fulton Alt), and Houston (Paul Zeigler) and interviews with established artists Warren Niedich and Isaac Julien. Long-time contributor, Ed Osowski, contributes to this issue with two exhibition reviews from Arles, France and Houston (*Les Rencontres d'Arles* and Paul Hester). Osowski once served as Board President for HCP, and founded the HCP members' library, now boasting over 2,000 volumes, on the basis of donated publications. If you would like to donate a book or a magazine subscription, we would greatly appreciate it. We also welcome letters to the Editor, exhibition reviews, interviews, book reviews, and other new ideas from our readers. Please contact me via snail mail with your proposal and samples of your work or writing.

This month marks my 1-year anniversary directing HCP. With this occasion, I am proud to announce we have begun building the Learning Center expansion next door. Look for our new building façade and state-of-the-art classroom facility opening in May. Other expansions include adding two full-time staff members last month: Program Director, Madeline Yale and Education Coordinator, Rachel Hewlett. These new hires will help HCP expand programs as well as our educational mission.

Over the past year, I have seen incredible dedication to HCP from its members, Board, and staff. Most recently, HCP received close to 100 donations from prominent national and international artists and galleries for our annual fundraising photography auction. The event was a smashing success, earning almost \$80,000 in one evening! The enthusiasm and interest in the event symbolized a growing dedication and interest to the photographic arts by artists, collectors, and the community in Houston. I thank all of you who donated and contributed to the success of that evening. I hope we can equal the fun this October as HCP celebrates **25 years as the center for photography in Houston!**

Editor and Executive Director





Isaac Julien  
*True North Series* (Untitled), 2004  
color photograph, 100 cm x 100 cm  
Courtesy of Victor Miro Gallery, London  
and Metro Pictures, New York

**Author’s Note** In July 2005, the exhibit *True North* opened at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles, California in collaboration with the event *Outfest: The 23rd Gay and Lesbian Film Festival*. Curated by Lauri Firstenberg, photographs from the film *True North* starkly, but elegantly, contrast the 1920s modernist architecture of R.M. Schindler in this exhibition space hidden away in a niche of West Hollywood. I was able to interview Julien on the day of his opening in the MAK Center’s garden about the exhibit, the film, and how it relates to larger cultural issues.

**Lara Taubman: Can you tell me why you entitled the piece *True North*?**

Isaac Julien: Well, the title, *True North*, oddly enough, came from discussions with a production company I worked with when I shot this piece in Iceland which was called *True North*. I think it’s very much a pun on the idea of true north and magnetic north. When you get to the North Pole, true north, in a way, disappears and you have magnetic north and it changes actually.

**What is magnetic north?**

Magnetic north is when you get to the point of the North Pole where you can no longer navigate by walking and you have to get there by compass, but the compass is not able to read the markings for specific geographical locations. Also, of course, true north has a relevance to a mythical dimension. In a Canadian northern American sense, true north is kind of a nationalistic, mythological, nation-building story of true north as representational of something authentic around Canadian-ness, a typical national story building around conquest, etc, etc.

For me, *True North* is an ironic title that is situated as the story around Matthew Henson perhaps being one of the first people to reach the North Pole. Everybody knows that Robert E. Peary was anointed with that accomplishment. So, in a way, there is, if you like, an ironic repositioning of Matthew Henson, who was his accomplice and companion who worked with him side by side for the achievement Peary has been known for that was, nonetheless, never recognized. This project is a meditation, a re-tracing of Henson’s footsteps. And in the narration, there’s a point to a moment historically that’s a rupture in the grand narrative of the polar expeditions and that interruption is precisely in the figure of my protagonist, Vanessa Myrie, who is re-tracing his footsteps.

So you have this absence/presence kind of thing: that which is what is absent from history and that which is present and is implied in the whiteness of the ice or the blue hues of it. Figuring this kind of protagonist in the piece is an enigma that is speaking through the voice of Henson. The narration comes from a text which is excerpted from an interview with Henson that was in a geographical, historical magazine thirty years after Peary’s death. Henson, in an interview, declares the very troubling, ambivalent response that Peary had to Henson once he let Peary know that perhaps he had gotten to the North Pole before him. I usurped and poetically re-structured the narration and the voiceover for the piece.

**I was so struck in the photographs and the film by this black woman who is an explorer or nomad who is in a sheer dress, making her look as if she is on a beach in the West Indies or Africa even though she is on a beach with ice chunks on it. Clearly, it’s a freezing environment and the implied contrast is so shocking. I am interested in this woman who is in a place where you would not expect to see a black woman or a female explorer, for that matter. You set up some glaring ironies there that are interesting.**

It probably begins by making a piece of work about ice and snow. I am very interested in debates that took place about a decade ago about representations of whiteness. I always thought that I couldn’t just make a piece that would be about those questions in a film because it wouldn’t really substantiate what I saw as the theoretical interests in these debates that had been taking place in various domains of humanities. So, I guess I have always been interested in translating some of these ideas into the realm of the thematic or the realm of visual arts.

When I came across Matthew Henson’s story I found the perfect vehicle. I could declare some expediency here in enjoying the idea of trying to re-frame the black protagonist in this setting because, for me, Matthew Henson’s journey to the North Pole creates this co- or inter-dependence. I think it’s really interesting that you have an African-American who is forging this journey into the sublime, into blankness, into whiteness, and almost into a certain disappearing-ness because Henson disappears from history. That’s one of the reasons. The second reason is the incongruousness that one may associate with this particular ecological landscape and the way that this subject is, of course, a subject that wouldn’t be considered an authentic part of that landscape. In a way, it is about trying to re-position grand narratives to obfuscate or obscure those histories that have taken place. And, of course, the reason that people want to go to these far away spaces and conditions has a certain colonial aspect to it.

It is interesting to think about Peary’s journey into this landscape that we associate with heroic white masculinity, and it is interesting to think about the way people tackle this subject. I came across a book through my research by Lisa Bloom, which is called *Gender on Ice*. This book was really fascinating because it spoke of women explorers going on polar expeditions. It spoke about how there had been a mythical construction around Peary and indeed, his dependency on the knowledge of the native Inuit. Matthew Henson obviously calls into question this idea of a certain white supremacist, masculinist quest and so there are all of those things which one wants to regenerate in some way, but not in a preachy, didactic sense. It is meant instead to hint at the third reason for her assemblage in the scene where she is wearing this diaphanous material. In a way, she has translated her gear into a mourning that is taking place.

**In my research for this interview, I had to return to Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*. [Gilroy introduced this term with his publication *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 1992, a book that shows the complex inter-connection between Modernity and the Black Diaspora.] Do you agree with Gilroy’s ideas that the Black Diaspora begins with his notion of the “Black Atlantic?”**

Gilroy’s idea of the “Black Atlantic” certainly informs the piece. I’d like to think about this piece of work in dialogue with that, but not as illustrating those arguments. *True North* took its premiere in Germany in an exhibition called *Black Atlantic*. In a way, it is to second-guess notions of what that relationship would be, but it is a metaphor for the black subject of what would be perceived as “Arctic” or “Europeanized” and, in a way, making history or becoming one with that space.

Another way that I am very interested in the “Black Atlantic” is the way in which Paul develops the idea of the displaced sublime.

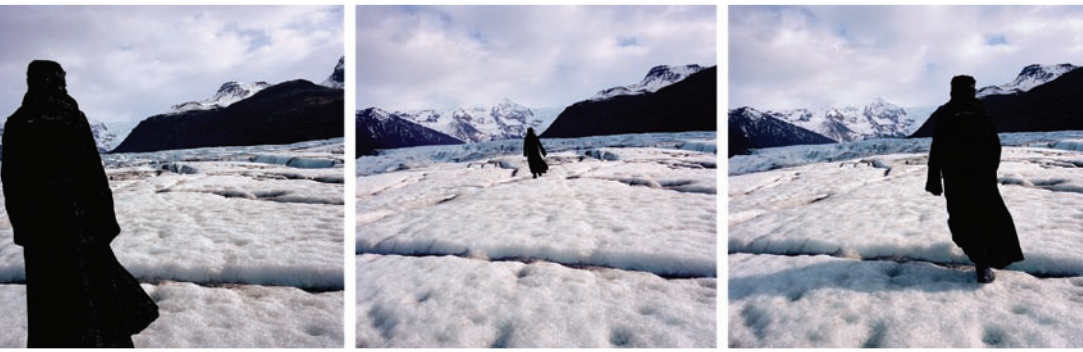
# True North

## Interview with Isaac Julien

by Lara Taubman

MAK Center For Art And Architecture  
(Schindler House)  
Los Angeles, California  
July 15, 2005





I see that as an idea where he talks about music and spirituals and this music that was the blues; and the way serene, sublime expression emerges from what would be ostensibly quite difficult conditions, deathly conditions.

I think he associates the sublime with what would be linked to German Romanticism, such as the painter Caspar David Friedrich. I would like to twist that a little bit because I think Mathew Henson was perceived as a manservant even though he was not. Peary certainly didn't give him much money after he achieved his success in the North Pole. Henson talks about arriving in New York and has no money to get back home. The way he was treated was abominable. But in the photographs, at least, I am trying to evoke some of those ideas.

This is why you have these protagonists and obviously there is a gender twist that comes out of reading Lisa Bloom's book *Gender on Ice*.


**Well, it seems like a lot culminates in the frozen water which is the same water that ships sailed on.**

Which is melting, by the way, as we speak. I think that whole idea of ice and its melting away even at the time when differences are incommensurable—that there is more bomb warfare being produced. Ice melts and earth is, as it were, radically shifting in these polar regions.

**I see a lot of the future in this work in an archetypal sense. I am interested in looking at that with the idea of fantasy that you touch upon so heavily and the fantasy of a world of certainty or uncertainty, or the certainty of a world of dreams, whether you are asleep or awake. How would you view that idea without it becoming escapist or essentialist? How do you view it translated into this idea of globalization which is still really unclear?**

I am utilizing cinematic and visual strategies to create an imaginary reflection on Peary's writing and, through Vanessa Myrie's character (who is a meditation on Matthew Henson's journey); I am re-tracing those footsteps to highlight the discrepancies between Matthew Henson's achievements and how we can then look at this landscape, perhaps differently.

I felt it was about Raymond William's idea of landscape when he talks about the town and country. I think it's interesting to then think about that relationship to questions of globalization, not because I want my work to fit into that discourse, but because problems with that discourse somehow become the humanities and are very important topics and rightly so. I don't see why the artworks have to fit in that discourse. But I would say that *True North* is a question around geo-politics. Those political messages very much encode the way in which these spaces have a reverence for the past but also have a reverence for spaces which are disappearing.

I suppose it's related to the notion of the "Black Atlantic." I almost see this in the end of the film where Vanessa Myrie is walking past what are ostensibly these ice glaciers. It could be part of the melancholia within the piece. There is a certainty about what the stakes are for thinking about history or the efforts made by black subjects in this discourse and terrain. You know, it's phantasmatic. It has a certain political resonance, but this piece of work is really concerned with questions of historiography or history than with globalization. 

*Lara Taubman is a freelance art critic and curator living in Phoenix, Arizona. She is currently co-curating an international group show at the Heard Museum for Native American Art in Phoenix, Arizona entitled "Holy Land: Diaspora and the Desert." She is also curating an exhibit of Abstract Expressionist work at the United States Embassy residence in Bucharest, Romania.*

Isaac Julien, from the *True North Series* (Untitled), 2004  
color photograph, 100 cm x 100 cm  
Courtesy of Victor Miro Gallery, London and Metro Pictures, New York





**Editor's Note** This interview is excerpted from *Earthling* by Warren Neidich, Pointed Leaf Press, Copyright 2005. Reprinted with permission from Pointed Leaf Press.

Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist  
Paris, June 4, 2005

# Warren Neidich

**Obrist:** My first question to you is about this complex new kind of work called *Earthling*, that has to do with collage and also with the cultural field. Can you tell me about this?

Neidich: I have been working quite a lot with the history of apparatuses and technologies as they intervene in photography and new media. The history of photography, cinema, and new media is a history of the production and reinvention of time and space. These new forms of temporality and spatiality become imbedded in architecture, fashion, design, and aesthetic practice and, as such, create new kinds of network relations, for instance in the visual-cultural field. These new network relations in the real world, which might be called the real-imaginary-virtual interface, can configure neural networks in the brain. These networks are dynamic and as they reconfigure the matter of the brain, they produce new possibilities for the imagination and creativity. They allow the mind to become perceptual in a very different way. This latest work deals with, what I call, the “Earthling” and looks at the “construction of global subjectivities” formed through the apparatus of global media.

**Where does the name come from?**

The name came from two sources, though this work is about a lot of other things as well. The first is science-fiction movies, where a visitor from another planet addresses those who have come to meet him or her as “Earthlings.” The second is Sun Ra’s cult sci-fi-blaxploitation-jazz film, *Space Is The Place*, in which Sun Ra and the Intergalactic Solar Arkestra descend on forties’ Chicago from Saturn to enlighten “Earthlings” about an alternative planet built on good vibrations. I am also very much attracted to magazine culture, which is a kind of distributed information system. You can go through these magazines and DJ or VJ them; you can choose them, post-produce them, edit them.

**What is your relation to them? Do you collect them or do you buy them everyday? You have something like an archive, though I’m not sure exactly what you’d call it. You deal so much with information. Do you have an archive for processing, for testing everyday information? Do you have a kind of an art lab?**

I do have a kind of art lab. This project started in a very different way and then it changed midway. It began with going to cafes, as all these pictures take place in cafes.

Warren Neidich  
*Morning Star*, London  
performance, 2004  
Type-C print  
30 x 40 inches  
courtesy of  
Michael Steinberg  
Fine Art.



**And you were recording in cafes?**

Yes, I was very interested in this idea of indeterminate spaces, spaces where people kind of linger and then move on. Tourists always go to cafes, the bohemian culture started in cafes, and I wanted to connect with that. In the beginning of this series I started using whatever magazine I found at the cafe as a readymade or found object. It operated as a kind of fetish of the cafe. Then, as the project progressed, I became interested in magazines in general. It was then that I started collecting them. The project started about two years ago, and about a year ago I started realizing that I was missing some of the great headlines: this one about Tony Blair in the *Morning Star*, for instance, concerns the idea of the delusional. I didn’t find that one in a cafe. I saw it on a newsstand and realized that I really wanted to utilize all the information available and not restrict myself to a certain set of rules or regulations.

I think that artists have to put some regulations on the projects they do, otherwise they become unfocused. In this case, I changed the rules and started collecting the magazines from anywhere and anyplace. A lot of different things started happening when I made that decision, and that is when I really got into the language of magazines. How funny they can be. How funny certain juxtapositions of headlines, titles, and advertisements can be, like Surrealist/Situationist jokes. I became interested in how headlines were used in different ways, in the multiple layers of textuality, and how they relate to different kinds of temporality. For instance, the headline is something like a sound

bite. It has a very quick temporality. Then you have the subtitles, which are read in a different amount of time. You can read the newspaper in different temporal zones and you can utilize different methodologies to access the information. You can read each article through and through and in a serial way, moving from one article to another, or you can read it randomly like a *dérive*.

**What interests me is that you are always bridging to other disciplines: you have a great and interesting connection to science and architecture. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you came into this contact zone, about how it started?**

Well, I have always been interested in history and critical theory. I have believed from the very beginning that art should produce new sensations, new kinds of perceptions, new kinds of imaginings.

**Like Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art produces extraordinary experiences?**

Or hallucinatory experiences. Let’s go beyond that. Art is a kind of exercise for the possibilities of the mind. It’s like break-dancing or ballet.

**Like a non-chemical LSD?**

Yes, a non-chemical LSD. That could get me into my theory called the “Society of Neurons,” which is a different question and one I’m not sure I want to trip into right now. But since you asked, here is a little



of that theory. Different kinds of artistic experience stimulate or call out to different populations of neurons which produce signals utilizing different neurochemistries, like dopamine, acetylcholine, etc. In some cases, artists take specific drugs, like peyote, as part of the rituals surrounding their art production. *Ecstasy*, an exhibition currently going on at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, addresses this very issue that the experience and the consciousness it facilitates is the product of what I am referring to as “Society of Neurons” and how they all act in harmony at any moment of awareness. They express themselves differentially depending on context in a ratiomatic manner. The ontogeny, or individual development, of the nervous system and the subject may be a result of a coevolutionary process by which certain kinds of cultural context call out to the developing nervous system differentially and favor the selection of certain neurochemical systems over others. Each culture may provide a stable enough network or symbolic ecology, which has evolved over thousands of years and which produces individual subjectivities generation over generation through sculpting networks of neurons, spatially and dynamically, preferentially. Art affects visual, auditory, and haptic culture. Art, like cinema, according to Deleuze, may create new forms of connectivity possibly affecting the distribution of neurochemical systems in the brain. This theory gives a powerful new importance to art.

My ideas about art and the brain are not intended to illustrate concepts and ideas of neuroscience, which can be a problem for art-science initiatives. They are about importing a new vocabulary that artists can fold into their art practice, as a way of energizing it through the production of difference and hybridity. If anything, my work is not about perception or sensation but rather about evolution and ontogeny. Artists like Seurat, Duchamp, Cézanne, the Futurists, Richard Hamilton,

My ideas about art and the brain are not intended to illustrate concepts and ideas of neuroscience, which can be a problem for art-science initiatives.

Bridget Riley, Gary Hill, and Dan Graham were all interested in science. Olafur Eliasson, Matthew Ritchie, and Carsten Holler are artists today who also share this interest. I once talked to Dan Graham about the early seventies and he told me that all the artists were reading electronics and science magazines. What I am trying to say is that many artists have folded concerns with science almost imperceptibly into larger networks of culture, sociology, psychology, economics, and history to produce a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

**Marina Abramovich’s interest in Tessler and so on...**

Yes, absolutely. Artists have always worked this way. It’s also interesting what happened post 1992/1993, after the internet explosion. What happened was that all the barriers, all the specificity of materials, started breaking down. Whether you are talking about art or you are talking about the barriers between different knowledge fields like science, cultural theory, or critical theory, they all started breaking down.

**Has the internet changed the way you work?**

I already had a history of being a scientist, having studied neurosciences and been a doctor in the eighties. After completing a project called



*Camp O.J.*, where I photographed the press at the O.J. Simpson trial as one would a rock-and-roll concert for *Spin Magazine*, I felt that I had nothing more to say about the relation of the production and mediation of the real using the theoretical tools that make up the toolbox of art. I realized that it was time to embrace my past as a scientist in order to inject a new vocabulary into my work, as well as perhaps to discover the neurobiological roots of what I was observing in the macrocultural field. Perhaps I felt the need to reinvent myself as well. Perhaps political and social systems were operating at the level of the neuron network, and biopolitical thought, as in the “Society of Control” outlined by Foucault, was being directed towards the brain. The *Earthling* series and a recent text I wrote for a forthcoming book edited by Deborah Hauptman called *The Body In Architecture* and my essay therein is called “Resistance is Futile: The Neurobiopolitics of Consciousness” are to some extent the culmination of this project. ...

**Have you ever thought about memory in your work, because memory has always been considered static, whereas in actuality it is a dynamic process?**

I have done a number of projects concerning different aspects of memory. Artists have always embraced memory and one could say there was an aesthetic memory. For instance, Christian Boltanski and Annette Messanger have explored cultural memory and traumatic memory for some time now. *American History Reinvented* (1986-1991), *Collective Memory—Collective Amnesia* (1990-1994) and *Beyond the Vanishing Point: Media and Myth in America* (1996-2001) were three projects I did in which memory was a preponderant interest.



this page, above: Warren Neidich *Respekt*, London, 2004, Type-C print, 30 x 40 inches courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art.

this page, below: Warren Neidich *Newsday*, New York, 2005, Type-C print, 30 x 40 inches courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art.

left page: Warren Neidich *Chitali*, New York, 2005, Type-C print, 30 x 40 inches courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art.



...the images that are most successful in drawing the attention of the observer are the ones that take advantage of the dynamic ontogenic proclivities of the nervous system

The *Earthling* project riffs off these and concerns the construction of a global memory in the sense of what Paul Virilio called “phaticity.” The word phatic is the root of the word emphatic. The history of the image, coevolving with that of the imagination, is one in which images are being produced that are more and more attention-grabbing, more phatic. These images are in competition with each other in the visual-cultural field, and over time they are becoming more refined, or what I call cognitively ergonomic—the images that are most successful in drawing the attention of the observer are the ones that take advantage of the dynamic ontogenic proclivities of the nervous system. What I mean is that the static condition of photography has been superseded by the linear dynamic time of cinema, which has been remediated by the non-linear digital time and space of new media (non-narrative cinema is a transitional phase). The addition of dynamic aspects has made images more and more phatic, more cognitively ergonomic. This refinement is the product of the image-industry, of collusion between advertising, cinematic special-effects, and now the political propaganda machine. ...

**In your work you use photography, video, sculpture, installation, and drawing, even the reinvention of photography. If you look at the work of Ed Ruscha you could say that the car is his medium. What is your medium?**

What is my medium? Well, I started as a photographer. By the way, Rirkrit Tiravanija started as a photographer too, I don’t know if you know that.

**He wanted to become a documentary photographer like a Magnum photographer.**

Well, in answer to your question, if Ruscha’s medium is his car mine might be the brain. I mean that as a joke. Anyway, what is very important to understand about my work is that since I began as a photographer I tend to think of all mediums in terms of photography. For instance, in London I did this project called *Blindsight* in which I used the machine they paint streets with to paint a green line from the subway station to Moorfields Eye Hospital, so that partially sighted people could find their way there. It was a kind of Situationist project about nested perceptual realities within the larger framework of the urbanscape. In the end, however, that line became something that I photographed and that generated images. Beyond the photographs of the document of my performance I actually made images that recounted the very nature of what it is to be blind and described the limits of the camera as image machine. Could the camera act like touch and construct a total image from a multiplicity of possible focal points in time, in memory?

I did another work called *Silent* in Madrid. My partner, Elena Bajo, and I brought something that’s usually installed in suburban communities—a highway sound barrier—into the center of Madrid. It was a 70m sculpture that created a space of solitude and meditation in the middle of the city. For me, it ended up as something to photograph. It was reminiscent of a large earth work like the *Spiral Jetty*, which became known more as a series of documentary images. I mention this because I am still very much a photographer. No matter what I do, it always comes down to the static image of the photograph or the video. The difference between myself and Nan Goldin, and what makes me very close to somebody like Thomas Ruff, it is that I am not so much interested in the image. I am not a photographer who explores the image and tries to construct a specific style: I am more interested in artists who use different mediums within photography itself. I used many kinds of historical processes in *American History Reinvented*, from platinum to albumen prints. In the *O.J. Simpson* and *Beyond the Vanishing Point* projects I cross-processed the photographs. I am much

more about mediums than actual images, although I do think there is always a perfect process for a particular group of images. I am also about apparatus. Like Jean-Luc Godard, I use different apparatuses. I am interested in how an image is produced. I am making the production of the image transparent. I am not interested in dislocating the viewer from how the image was made, but want him or her to feel part of the process. In Godard’s *Mépris*, for instance, the first scene opens with a man holding the microphone for the actress and the next scene is simply the camera lens. In the middle of the film Godard stops the action and interviews himself.

**It’s very much like Lars Von Trier, but in an interesting way he creates a different situation.**

Lars Van Trier is very much like Godard in that he dispenses with all the high-tech paraphernalia of cinematic production, leaving you with the grain of the film, poor lighting, and camera movement. So, by complete denial, you affirm what it is you want to relinquish. As I said, everything is Godard. ...

**Everything is Godard.**

Yes, everything is Godard. If you look at what many artists are doing today, so much is influenced by him.

**I think that is a great conclusion. Thank you.** 📺

*Warren Neidich is currently a visiting artist and research fellow at the Center for Cognition, Computation and Culture at Goldsmiths College, London.*

*Hans Ulrich Obrist is co-director of the Serpentine Gallery, London and curator at the Museum of Modern Art Ville de Paris, Paris, France. He curated “Utopia Station” at the 2003 Venice Biennial.*

# ALLISON HUNTER

recent work

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# Edgar Martins: The Diminishing Present

**Note from the Director of the Moth House** Established in April 2002, the Moth House is committed to publishing a wide range of photographic and artistic work by established and emerging artists from Britain and abroad. The Moth House is dedicated to publishing work that continually redraws boundaries between the particular and the universal. We aim to be instrumental in laying foundations for a physical and ideological revolution of the book format. In April 2005, we will be launching a new limited-edition monograph by Portuguese artist Edgar Martins entitled *The Diminishing Present*. Martins' work encapsulates the essence of our editorial program for it has a strong thematic basis, deals with contemporary issues, and reassesses historical themes and perspectives. Furthermore, it looks beyond traditional forms towards innovative ways of using photography and extending its vocabulary.

Edgar Martins' work deals with urban spaces and geographical categories, non-spaces and liminal spaces. His photographs use the rhetorical forms of observation, perspective and vivid color schemes to produce a sense of allegorical alienation which celebrates a loss of certainty. Unvarnished, unpremeditated, his "landscapes" seem to call into question the complexity of a collective unconscious. Martins' practice has contributed to the development of photography as a cultural form, challenging the aesthetic boundaries of the medium. His images explore the concept of landscape as an idea and a form and produce a disquieting conjunction of reality, hyper-reality, fantasy, and fiction. Martins' work portrays a permanent ambivalence between poetic-failure and the promise of success. In *The Diminishing Present*, fragile landscapes stage cultural dramas. **André Montenegro, Director, the Moth House, [www.themothhouse.com](http://www.themothhouse.com).**

by Angus Carlyle

left and right:  
Edgar Martins  
*Untitled*, from the series  
*The Rehearsal of Space*, 2005  
courtesy of the artist  
and the Moth House.

**Editor's note** This text was originally commissioned by Anamnese, a digital platform on contemporary art from Portugal ([www.anamnese.pt](http://www.anamnese.pt)). It is reprinted courtesy of the Moth House.

"We sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilise the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or direct their courses. In short, by means of our hands, we create a second nature within the natural world," Cicero <sup>1</sup>.

"Today our sight is weary, burdened by the memory of a thousand images ... We no longer see nature, we see pictures over and over again," Cezanne <sup>2</sup>.

"Ruins: Induce reverie; make a landscape poetic," Flaubert <sup>3</sup>.

At the private view for Edgar Martins' solo exhibition *The Diminishing Present* (Photofusion July/August 2005), guests could be observed adopting the stance that has come to characterise the stereo-typical gallery-goer: hands clasped at the small of the back, feet shoulder-width apart, the torso gently inclined towards the object of scrutiny, eyes narrowed in conspicuous concentration. Although such a posture has its absurdities—vulnerable to exploitation by the more physical comedian—it nevertheless possesses something appropriate as a way of navigating the world constituted by Edgar Martins' photography.

In that world, the image cannot be accommodated by the glance that grasps things wholesale; instead, we are compelled to occupy the terrain identified by Vilem Fluss where "wandering over the surface of the image, one's gaze takes in one element after another and produces temporal relationships between them. It can return to an element of the image it has already seen, and 'before' can become 'after'" <sup>4</sup>. Encountering a sequence of Martins' work in a gallery setting exacerbates this process of scanning beyond the boundaries of the single frame as the viewer is induced to engage with elements between separate images, establishing yet more complex relationships of Fluss' 'before' and 'after.' As Martins has steadily accumulated a public body of work, this relational viewing has correspondingly intensified, with junctions and disjunctions emerging between distinct series of images, for example, between those of *The Diminishing Present* collection and those of *Black Holes and Other Inconsistencies*.

Confronted by a Martins' photograph there is always the temptation to succumb to the vertiginous sensations afforded by such scanning of the surface, a temptation heightened by the opportunity to shift scale; to pass from a close exploration of the interplay between elements within the frame, to a more remote navigation of the elements that diverge and convergence between frames, to, ultimately, pulling back to explore the intersections between disparate series of images.

Whatever the immediate and sensual pleasures to be derived from such scanning, this form of analysis does not exhaust the potential embodied in Edgar Martins' work. Back at the private view, the attention






Edgar Martins  
*Untitled*, from the series  
*The Rehearsal of Space*, 2005  
courtesy of the artist and the Moth House.

of viewers could be seen to occasionally migrate away from the images themselves to focus on texts mounted on foam-board or vinyl-lettered on the gallery walls. The text that was interspersed amongst the large format prints and light-boxes was neither a personal statement of the photographer's intentions nor the choice citations drawn from the pool of approved philosophers that so frequently adorn exhibition spaces. Instead, this was an extended and intricate meditation on Martins' work conducted by the cultural critic Peter D. Osborne, author of the influential *Travelling Light*. The carefully-positioned presence of this text—paralleling the discursive commentaries on Martins that appear in his monographs and in the publications that feature his images (*Daylight*, *Eyemazing*, *Hotshoe*, etc.)—signals the need to augment a relational scanning orientated towards decoding the visual density of Martins' work with an equivalent negotiation of the ideas with which it resonates.

Among the striking compositional aspects of the Martins' photograph included here is its delicate disruption of the conventions of vanishing point perspective. The coarse arrangement of the walls that border the path falls out of configuration with the lines of projection that are expected to run parallel to the lens axis. This subtly disquieting effect is aggravated by the refusal of the trees that frame the image to conform to the vertical axis; the trees list to either side in ways which, when explored with Fluss' wandering eye, defy easy assimilation. The predicted vanishing point is itself deferred from the image, any potential horizon obscured.

This displacement of vanishing point perspective works to attenuate the anticipated dimensionality that such composition normally introduces. This is an image that contracts, lending it the tenor of a photograph of rigorously coordinated film set. The impression of a cinematographic image—of an artificiality derived from being flattened in projection and from having its elements orchestrated—is further worked through by the aberrant gradations in colour tone from the left to the right side of the image and by the equally anomalous restriction of the presence of the fog or smoke to its background.

In the world of Edgar Martins, such interrogation of the grammar of photography is neither casual nor cold. Not casual because this image joins a body of work already distinguished by a willingness to patiently examine the moribund dogmas of perspective (*Hidden*) or composition (*Black Holes*) or portraiture (*The Reluctant Sitter*). And not cold either because, while the presence of art historical reference may be as discernible as conceptual context, this is not work of closed calculation but of open imagination, of questions asked and asked again rather than answers bellowed in finality.

In these images, shot in the immediate aftermath of the terrible wildfires that caused such death and destruction in Portugal in the summer of 2005, are condensed some of the questions that have animated Martins' projects. Questions about borders and boundaries: the collision of the human and the natural, the presence of a second nature within the natural world, about the guilty poetry of ruins, about the limits of reason and, ultimately, the limits of representation. 

*Dr. Angus Carlyle is a writer, Co-Director of CRiSAP (Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice) and Senior Lecturer in Humanities at the LCC (UK).*

#### End Notes

1. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, in John Dixon Hunt, "The Idea of the Garden, and the Three Natures," in *Zum Naturbegriff der Gegenwart*, Stuttgart, 1993.
2. Paul Cezanne cited in Jeremy Melvin "Meaning, Mapping and Making of Landscape," *Architectural Review*, January, 2004.
3. Gustave Flaubert, Bouvard and Pecuchet and *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).
4. Vilem Fluss, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).





# LOOK AND LEAVE

## Portfolio

photographs by Jane Fulton Alt

This project grew out of having witnessed the aftermath of an unprecedented and devastating natural disaster. As a clinical social worker, I spent two weeks providing care and comfort to the survivors of Katrina and Rita, two deadly hurricanes that passed through the South in August of 2005. I was stationed in New Orleans and worked with a program called "Look and Leave." The residents who had been dispersed were "invited" back to view their homes in the Lower Ninth Ward, a New Orleans neighborhood that suffered not only the hurricane, but also from two breaks in a levee that drowned the community. I accompanied the residents back into their homes for the first time since they fled. I have been in mourning ever since. The stories I heard had one thing in common: they were all heartbreaking. These images are my attempt to describe what I saw. As public interest has waned, the media has pulled back. I hope these images will ensure that the survivors will not be forgotten. — Jane Fulton Alt

Jane Fulton Alt was born in Chicago in 1951. Alt attended the University of Michigan (BA, 1973) and the University of Chicago (MA, 1975). She has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. Alt is the recipient of numerous awards and her work can be found in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Beinecke Library at Yale University, University of Illinois Comer Archive, *Centro Fotografico Alvarez Bravo* in Oaxaca, Mexico, Center for Photography at Woodstock, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Wilmette Public Library and the Dancing Bear collection of William Hunt. In addition to photography, she is a licensed clinical social worker, practicing for over 30 years.





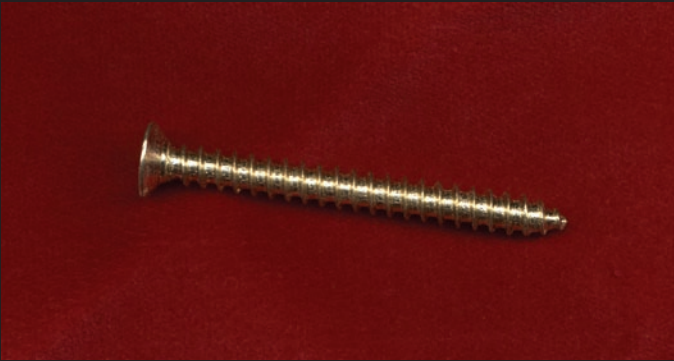


# Nothing to say

Image and text by Paul Zeigler

Miles south of Marfa, long before Shafter, this sign says nothing. It spots a prime location – the crest of a hill, visible from both approaches. Words dried from its surface, peeled with each wind. No one is sure if they fled north to Marfa or south to Praesidio. Perhaps they stopped and chatted briefly with the Shafter ghost signs before they vanished into the Chinati mountains. I search carefully, but this trail is too cold, and the cattle below me can’t understand my keening as the wind and sun slowly steal my words.

*Paul Zeigler is a photographer and poet based in Houston, Texas.*



The Art Guys



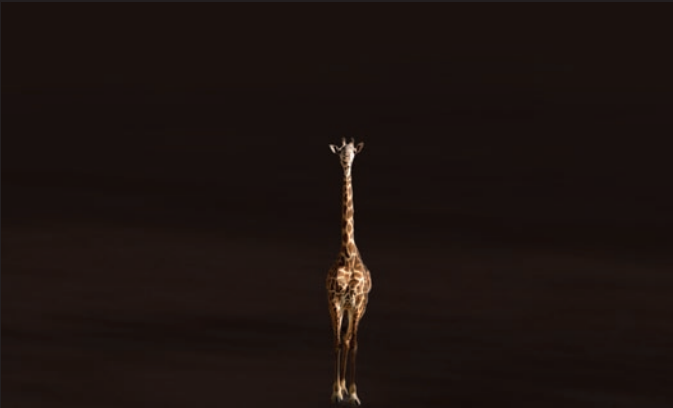
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# Les Rencontres d'Arles 2005

by Ed Osowski

Could there be a more felicitous site than Arles in which to look at photography? A major Roman location, its arena and ancient theatre are still in use. On the banks of the Rhone River, it was a prosperous medieval town as well. Its most famous resident, Vincent Van Gogh, once received treatment in its asylum which is now, like many of its deconsecrated churches, an exhibition site.

Arles stands in waiting ready to seduce the visitor but then quickly brings one back from paradise: roasting chickens, freshly cut lavender, cheeses, breads, fruits and vegetables fill the stalls at the open-air market. These tempting items also share space with the most pedestrian objects—tube socks, athletic gear, cheap plastic toys, and “Provençal” fabrics made in China.

This year's Rencontres d'Arles, the 36th installment of the first of now many international photography festivals, was like that market: over fifty exhibitions offered enormous choices, some worth repeat visits and others, like those ubiquitous tube socks, leaving the distinct impression that they had been seen many times before.

This year's exhibitions were grouped into five broad categories: 1) Awards, 2) A World under Stress, 3) Portraits, 4) a salute to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National School of Photography, and 5) exhibits presented by the *Association du Mejan*, a not-for-profit arts organization. In bookstores, bars, restaurants, and even on the walls of buildings there were other exhibitions to see. A display of nearly 300 books, candidates for the annual Arles book award, could also be perused. Additionally, lectures and panel discussions were offered each afternoon in the town square. And at night the town came alive with walking tours and various programs in the arena. One evening Anushka Shankar, with her father Ravi Shankar in attendance, presented a program of sitar music.

Visitors quickly spread word of which shows to avoid: one thinks of Miguel Rio Branco's *Muted Cries* where a church, darkened to the point that one felt afraid of tripping on the uneven floors and stairs,

was the site for a mixture of sounds of overheard conversations, whispers, and music with still photographs and slide projections filling the walls. One also recalls Rosangela Renno's installation of appropriated and manipulated images of weddings and automobile accidents offering a political message that seemed at least a decade old.

But there were far more exhibitions that were fresh, exciting, and intelligent. What follows are personal responses to eleven exhibitions, my “greatest hits,” if you will, of the 2005 Rencontres d'Arles:

1. **Miroslav Tichy** A recluse, now in his eighties, Tichy constructs his own cameras from pieces of cardboard and the bottoms of bottles which serve as lenses. His images, made in the 1980s but not shown until 2004, are the voyeuristic results of his hidden observations of women dressing and undressing, sun-bathing in parks and on balconies, walking. His negatives provide just the faintest scraps of information and, after crudely printing them, Tichy abandons them to the natural environment. He nails them to fences and walls and tosses others into bushes or his garden. Months pass before he “rescues” them. The results? Shapes barely emerge from large expanses of over-exposed landscape. Are these relics from some cult that worshipped the female nude? Or are they kitsch? Their abused surfaces and their obscurity make reading them a task. Tichy's exhibition returned the viewer to the question, raised in the 1980s, of the “male gaze.” But they also seemed to offer a witnessing to the difficulties of making art under a Communist government.

2. **Barry Frydlender** Frydlender's large-scale color images convinced me of their importance when I first saw them at New York's Andrea Meislin Gallery in September 2004. They derive from the traditions of documentary photography. But they are anything but quick responses to a significant moment. One quickly realizes



right: Barry Frydlender, *Smoking Sinai*, 2004  
courtesy of Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles

left: Barry Frydlender, *Pitsoziya*, 2001  
courtesy of Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles

below:  
Françoise Hugier, *Javais huit ans (I was eight years old)*  
courtesy of Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles

below right:  
Joan Fontcuberta, *Miracle & Co*, *Miracle de la lévitation* (Miracle of the levitation)  
courtesy of Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles



Frydlender is a master at computer programming, digitization, and manipulation. He presents small clues to warn the viewer not to trust what the eyes see. Everything about his image-making is decisive and deliberate. In these works time both stops and simultaneously advances. His image of a terrorist incident seen from his studio in Tel Aviv is a great work made by a great artist.

3. **John Divola** Those crazy dogs, that seem to appear out of nowhere, barking and running as you travel down the deserted landscape of the American West, are Divola's subject. Using a motor-driven, hand-held camera and fast film, Divola photographs a bleak terrain where speeding devils twist and blur, bare their teeth, and where some terrible incident is about to happen.

4. **Simon Norfolk** His war imagery of Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq, here ironically titled *Et in Arcadio Ego*, is indirect and subtle. Norfolk's vision of a shattered world offers small moments of grace that struggle to keep hope alive. His balloon seller, posed beside the bombed-out remains of a tea house in Kabul, brings punches of color to a bleak, monochromatic setting. Light and shadows take on weight and gravity in his photograph of a playground, the children's swings and slides set against three massive military vehicles.

5. **Yuji Ono** If photography is a way of seeing, then Yuji Ono has turned his back on that definition. His black and white photographs of old master paintings (Fragonard, Rembrandt, Caravaggio) are what remain when memory flees—light admitted through the windows in the galleries where these paintings are hung, a hat, a hand, a face emerges—and then disappears. These works are sly, elegant, and seductive: they frustrate one's expectations while dazzling with their emptiness.

6. **Joan Fontcuberta** Anyone who has ever been amused but also troubled by accounts of images of the Virgin found on grilled cheese sandwiches or depictions of the Crucifixion on screen doors would find *Miracles and Co* amusing. Appropriately displayed in a medieval cloister—did a setting ever seem a more perfect a match for an exhibition?—Fontcuberta's project presents photographs of monks levitating and of a piece of ham with the face of Jesus on it. All of this, one is asked to “believe,” comes from a Finnish monastery. Not very subtle, Fontcuberta's project offered laughter as a response to the excesses of religious fundamentalism.

7. **Keld Helmer-Petersen** Does Martin Paar ever sleep, I sometimes wonder. Here he displayed color reproductions of photographs made in 1948 by the Dane Helmer-Petersen. Paar's recent *The Photobook: A History, Volume 1* introduced Helmer-Petersen's flat, direct, blank approaches to mundane urban subjects. These were works that anticipated William Eggleston and Stephen Shore by a generation.

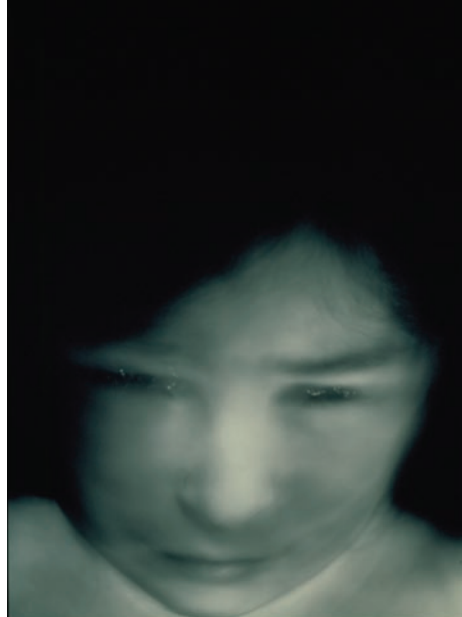
8. **Christen Stromholm** In 1965, a Stockholm department store mounted Stromholm's *For My Own Memory*. This scramble of black-and-white images could not have been less appropriate for shoppers to contend with. After three days, the show was hastily closed. Miraculously, the photographs survived. One found images of drag queens preening before the camera as they applied make-up and walls covered with graffiti. Nothing could be more shocking while also being any more banal than these photographs. One was reminded of Larry Clark and Danny Lyon but also of Brassai and Andy Warhol.



9. **Françoise Hugier** In 1950, Hugier, living in Cambodia where her father oversaw a rubber plantation, was kidnapped with her brother by Vietnam raiders. Eight months later they were reunited with their parents. At the age of 61, Hugier returned to Cambodia. Her project, *I Was Eight Years Old*, walks the fine line that divides reality from fiction. Not afraid to mix genres, she moves with ease from portraits to landscapes to interior images and mixes color with black-and-white. These works are part dream and part reality. This is visual autobiography that is neither self-serving nor hermetic. Hugier presents a quiet, intelligent document: an example for all who would seek visual equivalents of their memories of loss and separation.

10. **Sarah Moon** Moon's photographs and videos are amazing, lush and romantic, instilled with a sense of highly-wrought emotion, structured with story-telling devices, and totally absorbing. Handsomely installed in a suite of rooms in an 18<sup>th</sup> century home, *Tales* groups illustrations of three childhood stories by Anderson and Perrault. Moon understands that terror and pathos lie just beneath the surface of stories read to all of us when we were children. Scenes from Moon's *The Little Match Girl* had me transfixed and in tears. *Tales* visualizes the dramatic and emotional essence at the heart of these stories. These ten remarkable exhibitions set a standard that was not





clockwise from top left:  
John Divola, courtesy of Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles

Gary Schneider, *Any*, 1994, courtesy of Bill Hunt

Yuji Ono

Gerald Slota, *Untitled* (Big Head), 1996, courtesy of Bill Hunt.

Victorian women holding blank sheets of paper to their faces. This image demonstrates the surreal and inexplicable quality of the images in Hunt's collection.

It might be true that vision is the one sense on which we most depend. As I type this article, it is raining but I barely hear the sound. I am hardly aware of the taste of coffee which sits in a cup to my right. Do I smell anything other than my dog who probably needs a bath? But I cannot write without holding a pen or touching a keyboard. My sense of touch is crucial to my activity. But most importantly, I must see to write, to look at images from the catalogue of the Arles exhibitions, to refer to notes, to look at publications I brought back from France.

Seeing is, however, always problematic. Ask any two witnesses to an accident and you will quickly see how true this is. The Western tradition itself warns us that looking is not always easy nor recommended: Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she viewed, one last time, the home she was fleeing. Sometimes one can see too much and subsequently know too much: Saul was blinded at the moment of his conversion. Is Lear a fool because he is blind or does his blindness make him fool-like? Doesn't the fool have insights that saner people never achieve? Oedipus blinds himself when he realizes that he has broken the incest taboo. The only way to return to a time of innocence is to destroy his vision. Children sing, "Close your eyes and count to ten" when they play hide-and-seek. At birthdays the command is to close one's eyes and make a wish. And the Beatles sing, "Close your eyes and I'll kiss you."

As Hunt arranged the selections from his collection, looking and seeing become steps on an emotional journey, one that moves from blindness to awareness, from innocence to its opposite.

A small Berenice Abbott print (1930s) was displayed in one gallery: a murder victim lies on the stairs of a Manhattan brownstone. A sheet covers all but his legs and feet. We cannot see him, cannot identify him. Why is that? Was his murder too gruesome, the details too brutal, to look upon? Is it decorum or modesty that keep him from our view? There is knowledge under that sheet, behind that veil, on the other side of the wall, beyond the smoke. But the viewer is not privileged or prepared or emotionally capable of handling whatever that truth is.

When photographs are viewed metaphorically, as they are in *Collection Dancing Bear*, as signs that spell out the dangers and perils of leaving behind the safety of one's emotional blindness, then their provenance, their value, their chronology, their maker, indeed their actual condition become secondary considerations. Hunt is an expert

on vernacular photography—those items made by anonymous makers—and snapshots—those pictures once intended to be shared and enjoyed by family members but now, quirky in their appeal, pieces of paper with information that has slipped away. Hunt's installation showed how "found" photographs are not just quaint or amusing. An entire wall was covered with cartes-de-visite the tiny 3 x 5 inch portraits that came to replace calling cards during the Victorian era. In another room, Hunt arranged over fifty images of Arabic women, exotic examples of our cultural fascination with the "other." As these women look back at us through their veils, their covered eyes resonate with meaning as deep as that found in the Irving Penn photograph mentioned earlier.


It would be wrong to leave the impression that Hunt's collection is only serious. A press photograph of students in a cosmetology class (1950s) shows them with their eyes covered by paper tissues. It is an image both funny and totally baffling. In addition, Joseph Heidecker's four reworked cabinet cards (2001), formal portraits on which buttons and other round plastic objects replace the eyes that once looked back at the photographer, are silly, humorous, and surreal.

Heidecker's work also points to that other kind of seeing that employs the inner eye, the third eye, that accompanies the awareness that transcends the senses. What could better represent this inner way of seeing than John Hillers' haunting 1879 albumen print *Group of Zuni Albinos*? These men, women, and a child, their eyes tightly closed, express a level of vision, deep and profound, that mere eyesight cannot offer. But a question arises: have they shut their eyes because looking into the light is physically painful or do they see more "truth" in a world that most cannot see?"

One photograph on display accomplished something I've never before witnessed. It was the topic of numerous conversations. It was debated and discussed. It proved that it is still possible to shock. Hunt displayed a photograph taken on Sept. 11, 2001 by the Associated Press photographer Richard Drew. Titled *Terrorist Attack* but also known as *The Falling Man* it was seen briefly in the *New York Times* before shock and outrage removed it from public view. In it, a man has jumped from one of the burning Twin Towers. We imagine him falling, tumbling, and we know his fate. Recognizing that showing that photograph publicly crossed some undefined boundary, Hunt created an installation with *The Falling Man* at its center..

*The Falling Man* is not a particularly large photograph. It is grainy, black and white, and nearly featureless. Yet one cannot look at it without wanting to look away immediately. Its companion photographs, images of athletes and models jumping, diving, or floating, were meant to contain its raw and negative energy that seemed to fill the room. Here Hunt did something that no museum curator would ever do. Directly beneath Drew's photograph he positioned *Sky 14*, a nude image of a member of the Danish gymnastic team made in 2000 by Anderson and Low. But he hung their photograph upside-down.

Jonathan Anderson and Edwin Low were present at a tour of the exhibition that Hunt led. They were asked how they felt about this use of their image. Anderson replied that he felt that their image became a talisman, possessing the ability to stop the fall, to freeze before our eyes the inevitable fate of the falling man, to "counteract the negativity of the image."

One opens one's eyes to possibility, to awareness, to understanding. But often one opens them at great price. What Hunt's *No Eyes/Sans Regard* showed is that eyes held tightly closed may keep out pain but they also keep out knowledge and growth. 

*Ed Osowski, a former librarian, is a collector and writer who lives in Houston.*

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# Changing Houston

By Ed Osowski



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Not since Sicardi Gallery exhibited Luis Mallo's *In Camera* (January 15 – February 7, 2004) and FotoFest showed selections from David Maisel's *The Lake Project* and Mark Klett's work in the project *Water and the West* ( March 12, 2004 – April 12, 2004) has an exhibition of photographs in Houston seemed as exciting, intellectually grounded, and historically and aesthetically relevant as the panorama photographs by Paul Hester on view in *Changing Houston* at the gallery of the University of Houston College of Architecture (October 20 – November 26, 2005). If a viewer needed proof that Hester is both thought-provoking and thoughtful, a master at balancing romance against fact, then the 21 new works, all dated 2005, certainly made that case.

Paul Hester is not unknown to Houston audiences. Under the name Hester+Hardaway, his commercial photography regularly appears in regional and national architectural publications. He has been the principal photographer for *Cite*, the magazine of the Rice Design Alliance, since its founding 25 years ago. And he has been exhibited in Houston and elsewhere, most notably at the Menil Collection where *The Elusive City* was shown October 16, 1998 – January 3, 1999.

When called upon by his commercial clients, Hester has produced classic examples of modern architectural photography, works that stand up against the best work of Ezra Stoller and Julius Shulman, the two American architectural photographers whose work from the 1950s-1970 sets the standard. Works in this tradition treat the building as sculptural mass, with a sense of grandeur and beauty. But among the images last seen in his exhibition at the Menil , and now in his more recent body of work at the University of Houston, are images that can only be called perverse—works that stand the traditions from which they come on their heads.

Nostalgia often haunts our response to images of places that once existed but are now changed, gone, destroyed or recycled. This idea informed a project Hester and another Houston-based photographer, Orson Bean, presented in 1983 that directly informed this 2005 exhibition. Displayed in the Julia Ideson Building of Houston Public Library, *Houston-in-the-Round* (September 12 – October 22, 1983) brought together a group of panoramas made between 1903 and 1935 by two Houston commercial photographers, Joseph Litterst and Frank Schleuter. With assistance from writer Douglas Milburn, over 200 negatives were reviewed and a selection was made with new prints produced for the exhibition. Then, using the 100 year-old panorama camera originally employed by Litterst and now owned by

the Harris County Heritage Society, Hester and Bean rephotographed many of the same sites once visited by Litterst and Schleuter. The two bodies of work were installed side-by-side, prints of the older images paired with contemporary images of the same site. A 1924 photograph of Rice University depicting a few buildings on nearly tree-less expanses of grass hung next to a 1983 image in which those same buildings, and new ones, hide behind a dense forest. A second pair showed two views of downtown looking south from 806 Main St. The earlier photograph reveals a horizon that stretches as far as the camera could record with a few “modern” buildings close at hand. Its companion presents a row of new buildings with Main Street just a thin slice between a wall of office towers and the horizon is gone.

This 1983 exhibition offered an untroubling documentary view of how a small Southern city had grown. A vertical framework of tall buildings now replaces its flat, horizontal lines, and vistas are a thing of the past. The 1983 works were appropriate responses to the historical moment in which they were made: Houston was booming and these works announced its position among great cities. If the earlier works seemed simple and sweet, the new ones were strongly reassuring indicators that growth was a good thing.

Twenty-two years after his work in *Houston-in-the-Round*, Hester returned to many of the same




locations he and Bean had visited earlier. But the very apparatus used to make panoramas has been simplified. Indeed, in two decades, the very act of making a photograph has undergone a radical transformation. More significantly, what the viewer expects from that photograph has undergone considerable revisions. The viewer is now much more likely to question the “truthfulness” of the images printed on paper. What is seen by the viewer may very likely be a creation pieced together from various images. Despite the bulkiness of the original camera, a photographer working in 1983 still found him or herself using equipment and techniques that had not substantially changed in decades. Hester chose not to work with Litterst's old equipment but chose a simple, inexpensive digital camera to produce his new works and then printed them the “new” way, using a digital printer.

The installation of the works lets the viewer know that something here was amiss. When an archaeologist digs down, the discoveries start in the present and move to some point in the past. Hester chose to hang the newest works, not as one might have expected, as the top layer in a layered photographic history, but with the new works hanging beneath the other layers.

Hester's new work is startling and beautiful. One notices that color has replaced the flattering but abstract tones of the earlier black-and-white images. Secondly, one notes how much smaller by at least half the new works are. At a point when photographers have confused “large-format” with “important,” Hester forces his viewer to slow down, to look closely and carefully.

Perhaps most significant in a comparison

with the earlier works is that the older works are seamless and uninterrupted: one image from one negative. His new works are broken, challenges to the traditional definition of panoramas. Edges don't meet, colors don't match, and white spaces appear at the tops and bottoms of individual frames, an effect made deliberately by the artist.

These changes move the photographs beyond description. The expected subjects of urban photography, growth and change, the appearance of buildings and disappearance of others are no more interesting than the subtle changes in sunlight and shade. Compare three photographs made at the intersection of Yoakum Boulevard and Westheimer Road, “Nostalgia be damned!,” Hester seems to be saying to the viewer. The way water glistens on a street, the way light falls through trees on a summer afternoon are the intangibles that concern him here. Just as Brassai's photographs of Paris at night would be of little use for one attempting to construct a replica of that city, so would Hester's new photographs frustrate historians looking for an accurate model of Houston. Hester creates a new vision made of tiny installments that don't line up perfectly. More than two decades separate his 1983 works from the 2005 project. These bodies of work stand on opposite sides of a divide: “straight” photography, with its flat but tempting illustrative appeal, set against something more elusive, more transformative. 

*Ed Osowski, a former librarian, is a collector and writer who lives in Houston.*

left page:  
Black-and-white panoramas of Houston (circa 1903-1935)  
by Joseph Litterst and Frank Schleuter, installed above  
panoramas by Paul Hester and Orson Bean  
for the *Houston-in-the-Round* exhibition, 1983.

this page, above:  
Black-and-white panorama of Houston  
by Litterst and Schleuter, installed above a  
digitally manipulated print by Paul Hester  
for the *Changing Houston* exhibition, 2005

this page, below:  
Black-and-white panorama of Houston  
by Litterst and Schleuter, installed above a panorama  
by Hester and Bean for the  
*Houston-in-the-Round* exhibition, 1983.



# Regarding the Rural

by David Brickman      Photographs by William Christenberry, Matthew Moore, Julie Moos, Paul Shambroom, and Alec Soth



September 24 – December 31, 2005  
MASS MoCA, North Adams, Mass.

In a time when the art world seems fixated on “the next big thing,” here’s an exhibition that looks to the past for its inspiration. Curator Molly O’Rourke was curious to see what photographers today were doing to continue the spirit of the FSA photographers of the 1930s—giants like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee, who documented American rural life at the behest of a government organization. What she found was a group of five artists working independently, with influences as wide-ranging as Robert Smithson and Norman Rockwell, but with a consistency borne of rigor, vision and deep concern.

Of the five, only William Christenberry forges a direct link to the past work. He was born in Hale County, Ala. in 1936, the same year Evans began to make many of his most famous photographs there, and he later pursued a successful collaboration with Evans in the 1970s. Christenberry’s work, shown here, a series of 16 framed color prints presented in a grid, begins in 1974, shortly before Evans’ death, and continues through 2001.

The prints are quite small, demanding close attention by the viewer. They each depict a particular unassuming wooden structure in the woods, often from the exact same distance and point of view, so that their sameness is at first far more apparent than their differences. Titled *Red Building in Forest*, the series is obviously an extended portrait, but it also can be considered a meditation on landscape as the relationship of the cabin to the surrounding trees shifts with changes in distance and lighting.

All this is captured in the pale tones of old-fashioned Ektacolor (as opposed to, say, Cibachrome’s saturation) and the scale of the prints (not more than 5 by 7 inches) adds to the hypnotic

spell Christenberry casts. In the end, it is clear that his subject is neither the building nor the woods, but the passage of time.

Paul Shambroom derives his pictures from the same, depopulated territory as Christenberry, but there the similarity ends. His two 6-foot-long archival pigmented inkjet prints on canvas are drawn from an extensive series of photographs taken at government meetings in small towns across the United States. In each, the details of time, place, population, and the names of the people depicted are meticulously recorded, creating the impression of a genuine, humble documentary effort.

However, though the images are derived from immensely detailed, technically exacting 8 x 10 negatives, they are extensively digitally manipulated before output, and the “prints” are then stretched over thick frames, varnished, and float-mounted in a black void so as to appear as much like oil paintings as any photograph you’ve ever seen. Add the very carefully controlled visual tricks of soft focus (achieved with the view camera’s planar tilt mechanism) and the effect is that of being suspended perfectly in a world neither photographed nor imagined but halfway in between.

Though Shambroom is slickly masterful, I don’t doubt his sincerity—he presents his subjects neither revealed nor romanticized but, despite all the flashiness, believably neutrally. Then again, his choice of unsung heroes, semi-rural underdogs in a culture that will likely live to see them go extinct, shows a sentimental side that bears honest comparison to Rockwell, whose paintings these photographs physically resemble to a remarkable degree.

Rural heroes (or perhaps antiheroes) are also the subject of Julie Moos’ nearly life-size outdoor portraits of farmers who use genetically altered seeds produced by the Monsanto corporation. Born in Ottawa, Ontario, and now based in Birmingham,

Ala., Moos made her Monsanto series in Missouri and Illinois.

Her two 6-foot by 8-foot C prints front-mounted on Plexiglas show pairs of farmers literally out standing in their fields. Both images feature a merciless white light that emanates from a colorless sky and washes over the figures and the scene, which is otherwise the green color of knee-high soybean plants.

The poses are frontal—confrontational. Is Moos challenging the practices of these farmers, and are they staring back at her camera in defiance? We don’t know. Of the four people depicted, three are male, and all three appear guarded. Only the one woman (presumably the marital partner of her colleague) shows softness in her expression. But this contrast in appearance may also be a product of the alien light that envelops the taller men’s heads, which stick up above the green field, while hers is shielded by the plants.

In case you’re wondering, these photographs are printed straight (from 4 x 5 negatives), so the effect of that strange light is, presumably, authentic enough. There is, however, some distortion from the degree of enlargement, and the extremely shiny, edgeless plastic objects they have become through the mounting technique does enhance the otherworldliness of these otherwise intentionally mundane depictions.

Matthew Moore is himself a farmer near Phoenix, a city noted for its unrelenting sprawl across the Arizona desert. As an artist, Moore has made the land his canvas, hand-tilling and raising crops of barley for the express purpose of cutting

line drawings of tract houses into it before the land is given over to exurban construction.

He photographs the fields from the ground and from the air, where you can see other as-yet unsullied farm fields, huge housing tracts in progress, sweeping clusters of finished developments, and purple mountains in the distance. His yellow field of barley, with its burnt, black lines depicting the planner’s drawing of a three-bedroom ranch, lays in the midst of this unfolding drama like a Mayan signal to the gods of what man has wrought.

below left:  
Alec Soth, *New Orleans, LA*, 2002  
Chromogenic print (AP 1/2), 40 x 50 inches  
courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery



line drawings of tract houses into it before the land is given over to exurban construction.

Were Moore an interloper from the big city with an art degree and a conceptual label, I’d be pretty unimpressed with this exercise in futility. But this is his family’s land, and there’s no sneer of irony apparent in his sweat and toil. The photographs themselves are unassuming—four poster-sized prints mounted to black foamboard and trimmed to the edges, they are neither beautiful objects nor particularly well-composed. Rather, they document the real art, which is on the ground, as well as

Moore’s heartfelt commitment to the land.


Finally, Alec Soth’s five 40- by 50-inch chromogenic prints, framed in white to the edges, give a taste of the behemoth project that engaged five years of his life, in which he lugged an 8 x 10 view camera the length of the Mississippi River, from his home in Minnesota to the New Orleans delta. Soth is probably the best known of this group, and with good reason.

Though the argument could be made that he is influenced by the FSA and WPA photographers, in this color work I see more of Joel Meyerowitz’s *Cape Light* series—the attention to atmosphere, the sometimes garish interiors, the exquisite perfection of the compositions, and the allusion to a home place the photographer shares, all hark to that seminal work. What Soth adds, obviously, is scope but also relevance. *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is more elegy than travelogue—particularly now that Hurricane Katrina’s wrath has laid waste to that most American of cities at the river’s end.

But that disaster needn’t have happened to

make this oeuvre sing its dirge loud and clear.

Whether embodied in the snowblown *Peter’s Houseboat, Winona, MN* or the seedy, Hopperesque interior titled simply *New Orleans, LA*, this is work with great depth and real staying power. Soth has already been included in the Whitney Biennial, so I know I’m no prophet—but I assure you that he is indeed the genuine article.

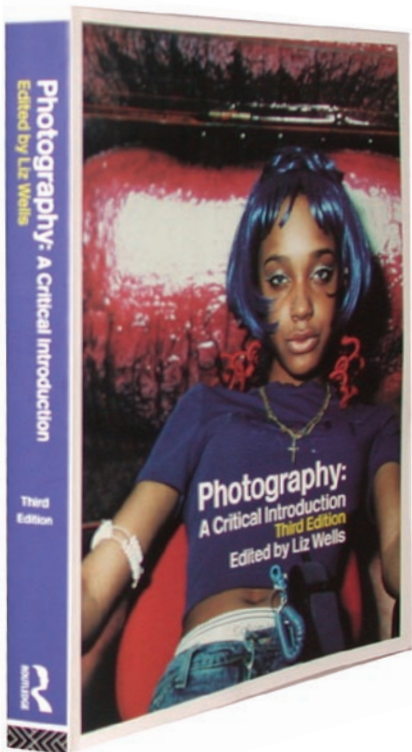
My only complaint about this show is that it should have been bigger. More prints by all the participants, particularly Shambroom and Soth, would have been hugely welcome. Even so, as a sort of curatorial exercise working within a limited space, it succeeds by bringing together important work and by raising key questions about the direction of American photography today. 

*David Brickman is a photographer, curator, teacher, editor, and art critic. He lives in Albany, N.Y. He wrote “In Memoriam: John Coplans” for the fall 2005 issue of SPOT.*

top: Paul Shambroom  
*Lee, New Hampshire (population 4,242) Board of Selectmen, January 27, 2003.*  
(L to R): Dwight E Barney (Chairman), Joseph P. Ford, Richard H. Wellington.  
2003, 33 x 66 inches

Paul Shambroom  
*Calumet, Minnesota (population 383) City Council, May 15, 2001, (L to R) Julie Childs (City Clerk), Connie Swanson (Mayor), John Anderson, Daniel Strand.*  
2001, 33 x 66 inches





*Photography: A Critical Introduction and Worth at Least A Thousand Theories, Too*

Third Edition, Ed. Liz Wells, Routledge, 2004  
382 pp. \$39.95.

by Terence Doody

In the opening lines of *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, the editor Liz Wells writes: “This book...offers an overview of conceptual issues relating to photography and to ways of thinking about photographs. It considers the photograph as an artifact used in different ways and circumstances, ...practices which take place in particular contexts. Thus it is essentially about reading photographic images rather than about their making.” And everything flows from this conscientious and unredeemably correct premise—including the fact that there are not enough photographs in this sea of theory. This is a text book, first, but also an anthology of essays produced by Wells and five colleagues from universities in England and the school of cultural criticism that grows from the works and leftist sympathies of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and John Berger. The authors take great pains to warn the student-reader that all of them have a personal stake in these arguments, but that none of them wants to claim any final authority, and they are proud of the debates and discrepancies that have deconstructed the book before we have even gotten to it. Nonetheless, the whole thing has a pretty uniform attitude and approach. What else are friends for?

The first chapter, written by Wells herself and Derrick Price, is an overview of the critical and theoretical issues in which photography has always

been embedded. The traditional first question—is photography art?—is relegated to the penultimate chapter, the sixth, and followed by the book’s climax, an excellent, up-to-the-minute account of the implications of electronic imaging—the digitalization of everything—which in fact renews the old, first questions about art and its ontology, the eye and the world. In some of the other four chapters, fashion photography is reduced to an aspect of commodity culture (I guess because fantasy is not serious enough). Photographing the body is virtually consumed in the politics of heterosexual pornography, and the critical rhetoric often sounds like this passage quoted from Julian Stallabrass: “Tagg presents ‘documentary’—which includes documentary photography—as ‘a liberal, corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crises through a linked programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restructuring the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and rescuing the threatened bonds of social consent.’ In this retrospective view which entirely discounts the beliefs of those individuals involved—including some who were committed to overthrowing capitalism—the complex and diverse currents of documentary photography serve the conspiracy by which the system survives.” (105-6)

But the pages of this book usually look like a friendly computer screen. In the wide margins, designed for taking notes, there are constant references to other sources and opposing views; definitions of key terms, which are printed in the text in boldface (*carte-de-visite*, mutoscope, photomontage); thumbnail sketches of historical luminaries like Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, Siegfried Kracauer, and Jean Baudrillard, among many others; and very fast reviews of basic books such as Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* and Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*. All of these serve as “links” to the book’s glossary, its list of photographic archives, and the generous bibliography. Although the format enacts the authors’ dispersal of authority, it is also a responsible model of generosity toward the students they address in print.

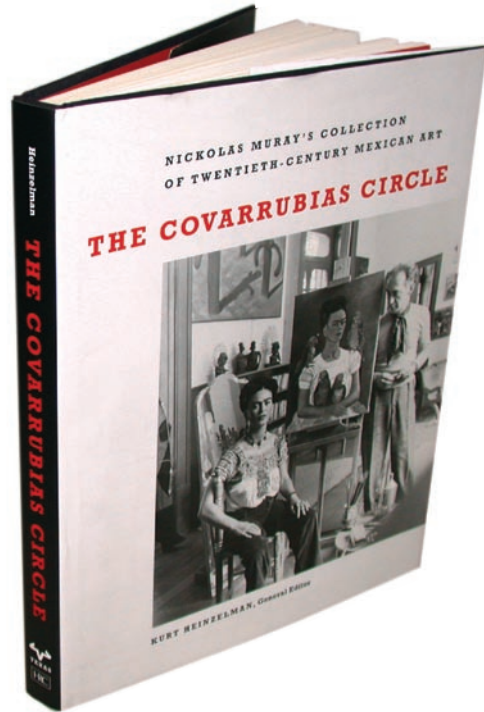
However, starting a textbook with a critical survey is deadly, and reading the whole thing from start to finish reminded me of the summers I spent on forced march through Janson’s *History of Art* and Spiro Kostof’s *History of Architecture*: two other numbing noble tomes. I began to think about how I’d use this book in the English classes I teach, where I’ve used Sontag, Barthes, and John Szarkowski’s *Looking at Photographs*. I was reading Balzac’s *Pere Goriot* as I was reading chapter five, “The Subject as Object: Photographing the Human Body.” Before the pornography issue takes over, phrenology and physiognomy are treated in terms of their relation to nineteenth-century ideas of representation. Balzac relies on these sciences with great faith, as does every novelist who ever describes a character’s face as a window on to the soul. In the overwhelmingly materialistic nineteenth century, the soul’s location is a serious problem. If it does still exist, where is it? If it has become “spirit,”

is it therefore an attenuated form of energy, or a form of history itself, in Hegel’s sense of “spirit”? And can the camera, a scientific instrument in this material context, still make art, be an art-machine? I’d use *Photography: A Critical Introduction* by teaching not the whole thing but the parts that open into the arguments that interest me. I don’t think teaching and learning are as well-served by an even-handed correctness about everything as they are by passion and advocacy of what matters most. The students will learn another version of what matters most in their other classes. This is why we have constructed the university curriculum as we have, so each discipline can deconstruct the others.

There is a great deal of information in Wells’ *Photography* and an ultimately liberating format for using it. The section in chapter one called “Case Study: Image Analysis: The Example of ‘Migrant Mother,’” Dorothea Lange’s politically loaded icon, is excellent; and it would have been a wonderful way to have started the entire book—by building up from an image rather than by descending from a theory on high. In chapter five, on personal and popular photographs, Patricia Holland makes a distinction between users and readers of personal pictures (117-118). Users know the people in the snapshot, who took it, and why. They are themselves the picture’s context. Readers are strangers who place the snapshot in other contexts and study it then as information or art. In the spirit of this difference, I think, this is a better book for those who learn to use it than for those who simply read it. And there is a nice contradiction here.

Most of us, I think, experience most of the photographs we see as users. We are the images’ context, and our “experience” is the operative value. When the meaning of the image is so heavily stressed and the apparatus outweighs the imagery, the fun’s stamped out. That’s what textbooks do, unfortunately, and the reason we still need teachers to be undigitalized, live, and in color. ■

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*The Covarrubias Circle: Nickolas Muray's Collection of Twentieth-Century Mexican Art*

Kurt Heinzelman, General Editor  
Peter Mears, Curator of Art  
University of Texas Press, 2004, 183 pp.

by Lois Parkinson Zamora

A combination exhibition catalogue and cultural history, *The Covarrubias Circle* orbits around two artists in New York City during the twenties and thirties, one a Hungarian photographer, the other a Mexican polymath: painter, writer, set designer, archeologist and anthropologist, curator, collector and cultural commentator. The friendship and collaboration of Nickolas Muray and Miguel Covarrubias in avant garde New York (read Greenwich Village), and the modernist movement that flourished there, is the subject of the several essays and the many illustrations in this book.

Modernism in New York (and Paris and Mexico City, for that matter) was international and transcultural, as the collaboration of our Hungarian and Mexican artists already suggests. Their own production is the primary focus of this book, but our attention is also called to the amazing reach of Mexican modernism as it operated in (and on) New York. Several of the great Mexican modernists worked there, and Covarrubias introduced them to Muray. Among them were Rufino Tamayo, Roberto Montenegro, Juan Soriano, Guillermo Meza and Frida Kahlo (who, for a time, was Muray’s lover). Muray collected their work, and he also photographed them—in groups, at work, posed, at play. One of the most famous photographs of Frida

Kahlo was taken by Muray in New York: Kahlo, age thirty, wears a magenta rebozo (shawl) and gazes enigmatically at the camera. An essay by Nancy Deffebach traces the influence of this single photograph, among the hundreds of “celebrity photographs” taken by Muray in his New York studio.

This, then, is what is meant by the book’s title. “The Covarrubias circle” was not a consciously constituted group or aesthetic program but rather a historical moment in which diverse cultural energies converged and cohabited. By extension, “the Covarrubias circle” refers to Muray’s art collection, now housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, and exhibited there last year. The purpose of this book is to document the collection and its relation to the history of American modernism.

The word “modernism” appears in most, if not all, of the six essays in this volume. The authors use it to place Muray and Covarrubias in their New York context, but the term has greater application, of course. Modernism encompasses a vast array of artistic products—visual, verbal, aural, kinetic—produced in Europe, the US, and Latin America during the first half of the twentieth century and well into the second half of the century in many places. The inclusiveness of the term sometimes blurs necessary distinctions, but it is, nonetheless, useful in reminding us that the arts are not separate, that artists do not live in generic or cultural vacuums, and that many modernists worked across media and cultures. The term overarches a variety of “isms,” including avant garde movements—indeed, in Spanish, “modernism” is best translated as *vanguardia* or *vanguardismo*, not as *modernismo*, which refers instead to an earlier, post-Romantic literary movement.

In fact, modernism is usually treated as a transatlantic conversation, with artists and influences moving across the Atlantic along an east/west axis, but there was also a strong north/south axis, as *The Covarrubias Circle* shows. This, perhaps, is the volume’s primary contribution. How Mexican expressive forms are “modernist,” that is, how they relate to modernism as an international artistic movement, has been too little studied. Rivera’s “muralism,” Kahlo’s “surrealism,” Tamayo’s “primitivism,” Covarrubias’ caricatures, which extend a particularly Mexican artistic tradition of social satire called “calaveras”—what these media share and how they differ from other modernist products remains to be considered in depth.

Modernism naturally encompasses contradictory phenomena: art works that are elitist and conservative (hermetic, erudite, ironic, self-reflexive), or popularizing and political (communal and mass media, indigenous and folk traditions), or art that combines these impulses, its experimental forms constituting a political program, whether dissident or conservative. Most modernists were social and political liberals, but even conservative modernists (T.S. Eliot, for example, or W.B. Yeats or Richard Strauss) were experimental in their artistic practices. Reform, whether artistic or political, was an essential feature of the modernist landscape. Muray and Covarrubias were “modernists” in some of these contradictory ways, and their artistic practice illuminated a small piece of this immense expressive territory.

Nickolas Muray (1892-1965) was born in Hungary and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of twenty-

one, impelled by the need to escape service in the Austro-Hungarian army, as well as by the desire to enter the flourishing art world of New York City. He was already an established engraver and photographer, and his strength was in studio portraiture. He became one of the preferred photographers of the New York power elite—writers and publishers, entertainers and politicians. The images in our collective consciousness of such figures as George Gershwin, Gloria Swanson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O’Neill and Babe Ruth are, in fact, photos taken by Muray, not to mention Frida Kahlo in her magenta rebozo.

But Muray’s work is not subversive of received artistic norms, as we expect modernist art to be. Rather, his portraits show their famous subjects in predictable poses against blank or mottled backgrounds, often looking at the camera, aware of their prestige. Most of the portraits were published in upscale magazines like *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*, as was his advertising photography, and later, in mainstream magazines like *McCall’s* and *Good Housekeeping*. He was an early master of color photography and commercial illustration, so while we may conclude that he was largely a failed modernist with respect to innovative artistic structures, he was an accomplished modernist in his use of mass media—not just in his use of magazines, but in his development of the medium of photography itself.

Today, only Muray’s photographs of dancers seem to hold up as valuable works of modernist art. They, too, are highly posed, but the dancers’ bodies are taut, geometrical, almost metaphysical, and furthermore, their subjects—Martha Graham, José Limón, Rosa Rolanda (Covarrubias’s wife)—were incandescent modernists. Muray was a contemporary of the great modernist photographers Steiglitz, Steichen, Bourke-White, Weston, Hines and Evans, but his work in no way equals theirs. Perhaps, in the end, his greatest modernist achievement was his art collection. As I have already suggested, a shared feature of much modernist art is its enthusiasm for cultural difference, and Muray’s collection of the Covarrubias circle reflects this enthusiasm.

Miguel Covarrubias (1904-1957) was born in Mexico City, and traveled to New York in 1923 on a Mexican government grant. He soon met Muray, who helped him find work as an illustrator and caricaturist. Covarrubias, like Muray, worked for *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, as well as *Fortune* and the *New Yorker*, and his urbane and insouciant swirls of India ink—a few sinuous lines creating a face or scene—remain defining examples of the “New Yorker style.”

These caricatures are sometimes satiric in a way that recalls the verbal jousting of the Algonquin Round Table, and they are often complex cultural commentaries as well. Thus, “drawings” rather than “caricatures” is probably the better way to describe them. In this regard, Covarrubias’ drawings of Harlem’s cultural scene far surpass those of the rarified social and artistic circles in which he and Muray moved. In 1925, *Vanity Fair* began to publish his studies of Black cabaret entertainers, which in turn brought him commissions to illustrate ground-breaking books including Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925), W.C. Handy’s *Blues: An Anthology* (1926), and Langston Hughes, first book of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926). His own book, *Negro Drawings*, appeared in 1927. Covarrubias stayed in New York until the mid-



thirties, during which time he published several more collections of his drawings, and illustrated many works of literature. This early Covarrubias is well represented in Nickolas Muray's collection, as one might expect, and later facets are also present.

In 1933, Covarrubias was awarded a Guggenheim grant to travel to Bali, where he lived with his wife, the American dancer Rosa Rolanda, for almost two years. An interest in the "primitive" or "exotic" characterizes much modernist art—one thinks immediately of the influence of African artifacts on Picasso and Brancusi, or indigenous Mexican culture on D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley. This impulse to include non-Western cultures reflects the dissident side of modernism, its resistance to the rationalism and materialism of Western culture. (This resistance also took the form of stream-of-consciousness fiction, atonal music, expressionist art and other forms of abstraction.) In 1937, Covarrubias published *Island of Bali*, written in English, illustrated in colored ink and gouache, and published in New York by Alfred Knopf. Sumptuous images of Balinese theatre, dance, musical instruments, fabrics, rituals, and landscapes reflect a keen ethnographic eye. The book was a popular success, and it remains, to this day, a classic work of literature, art, and cultural commentary.

Covarrubias returned to New York after his residence in Bali, but soon moved back to Mexico, where he was yet to do his best work. He had always been intrigued by indigenous Mesoamerican cultures, and now, perhaps inspired by his experience in Bali, he became a

serious anthropologist and archeologist. In 1948, he published the companion volume to his study of Bali, a book written and illustrated (again in colorful gouache, again published by Alfred Knopf) entitled *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (1946). His images of Tehuanas, the indigenous women of this region, are ground-breaking, both culturally and formally. In ways, they are similar to Frida Kahlo's modernist self-portraits, which often depict her dressed as a Tehuana. Happily, Muray's collection includes a few drawings and *gouaches* from both *Island of Bali* and *Mexico South*, but one must go to the books themselves to see the range of their cultural commentary, both in images and words.

*The Eagle, the Jaguar and the Serpent* followed in 1954.\* This book describes and illustrates North American indigenous cultures, and is more scholarly, less anecdotal and intimate, than the previous two. In it, Covarrubias proposed a cultural theory of the Pacific Rim, arguing that American cultures had contact over millennia with Asia and the islands of the South Pacific. Such a transcultural argument was perfectly modernist in its imaginative lineaments (the academic reviews were negative), its mixing of expressive media (his own, and those of his indigenous subjects), and its resistance to national and tribal borders and boundaries. *The Eagle, the Jaguar and the Serpent* was to be the first of a trilogy; the second was to focus on the indigenous cultures of Central America, the third on South America. The second was published posthumously in 1958.

Even after Covarrubias' move back to Mexico in the mid-thirties, he continued to work in the

US, curating part of the exhibition on Mexican art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1940, collaborating with the Mexican American dancer José Limón on stage sets for his modern dance performances, and executing a huge mural entitled "The Economy of the Pacific" in San Francisco for the World Fair on Treasure Island. All of these projects reflect the "modernist rage for cultural merger," as Kurt Heinzelman puts it in his introductory essay to this volume. In our postmodernist times, such mergers may seem obvious enough, but the current proposal for a fence—no longer figurative but shamefully literal—along the US/Mexico border suggests just how much we have lost since Covarrubias' time. Indeed, the transcultural energies of modernism were already endangered by the mid-nineteen-fifties. In 1953, Covarrubias, having come and gone freely for three decades, was denied a visa to enter the US. The influence of Senator McCarthy had already taken effect. As we witness our current round of official xenophobia, *The Covarrubias Circle* does well to remind us that we may (again) aspire to be otherwise. ■

\*Covarrubias's late work is not treated in this volume. For a complete account, see the excellent biography by Adriana Williams, *Covarrubias* (University of Texas Press, 1994).

Lois Parkinson Zamora is a professor of comparative literature and art at the University of Houston. She co-edited, with Wendy Watriss, "Image and Memory: Photography from Latin America," 1886-1994 (University of Texas Press).

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PETER BROWN

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# Call for Entries

24th Annual HCP  
Juried Membership Exhibition

June 2 - July 16, 2006

Application Deadline April 21, 2006

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