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Chuy Benitez is a first-generation Mexican American. Chuy received his Bachelor’s in Art in 2005 at the University of Notre Dame and is in his final year of MFA candidacy at the University of Houston.

Peter Brown is a founding member of HCP. He teaches at the Glasscock School of Continuing Studies at Rice University and his books are Seasons of Light and On the Plains. A new book West of Last Chance, a collaboration with the novelist Kent Haruf will be published this February by W. W. Norton.

Leah Devun is an artist and writer living in Houston. Her photographs and drawings have shown in galleries in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and throughout Texas. She writes for a number of local magazines, including Artpiece and Galleria, as well as national magazines such as Wired and Venus Zine.

Anthony Goicoeaa’s photography has garnered critical acclaim and international exhibition. The winner of the 2005 BMW-Paris Photo Prize, he lives and works in New York City.

Miranda Lash is a Curatorial Assistant at The Menil Collection. She received her B.A. from Harvard University and her M.A. from the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art. Her recent writings are published in Frida Kahlo: 1907-2007, Homage Nacional, and Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art.

Mary Magsamen and Stephan Hillerbrand are a collaborative artist team working with photography and video. They met at Cranbrook, Academy of Art and their work has been in international exhibitions and screenings. They live and work in Houston with their two children. Their “favored” website is www.maryandstephan.com.

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The Houston Center for Photography (HCP) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that protects, preserves, and promotes the history, culture, and public understanding of photography. HCP’s mission is to increase society’s understanding and appreciation of photography by its making available to the public its unparalleled collection of photographs and photographic images; by providing educational exhibitions, publications, educational programs; and by continuing the collaboration Houston Center for Photography with its many partners, to promote the history of photography through education, exhibitions, publications, educational programs, and community collaboration. Houston Center for Photography is supported by the City of Houston, the Texas Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Houston Arts Alliance; it receives operational support from the...
Tracey Snelling: Behind Closed Doors  Interview by Chuck Mobley

Tracey Snelling’s mash-up of mediums and genres culminates in a wildly diverse pastiche. Intricately assembled installations of vaguely familiar themes, places, and objects designed to elicit visceral response also disrupt the mainstream equilibrium. Audiences are obliged to consider their complicity in the communal voyeurism that is popular culture. To understand our relationship to contemporary American paparazzi, news media, and reality television culture, one can refer to the meta-narratives of the 20th-century conventional film industry. In the following brief exchange, Tracey and I attempt to draw a broad outline of the conceptual drive that underlies her art practice.

Tracey Snelling

Another Shocking Psychological Thriller
2004, 3-channel synched video installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Brown Bag Contemporary (New York, NY)

Chuck Mobley: What drew you to the cinematic, or more specifically to film noir?

Tracey Snelling: I grew up on movies. When I was young, my father and I would watch horror films together. There was a television program called “Creature Features” that would play films such as “Count Yorga” and “Mothra.” I would watch almost any movie that came on television, from Midnight Cowboy to Kung Fu in 3-D.

In university, I was able to take film history classes in place of some of my art history requirements. One of those classes was Film Noir. I found it fascinating that in all of these films, the hero or heroine always had some major flaw. I liked the idea that nothing was cut-and-dried, and the “good guy” was still bad. I also liked the power of the “femme fatale” figures. They seemed to show strength through making choices that broke the stereotype of the 1950s woman, who was often seen in films in a dress with an apron, bringing drinks to her husband and his business associates.

Is this part of what allowed you the freedom to explore working with video, sculpture, installation, and performing for the camera?

TS: My view of the world as a complex place that doesn’t fit into nice little boxes probably has an influence on how I work. There’s a sense of freedom that comes from knowing that there are few, if any, absolutes in life. With my work, I feel that the different mediums are just tools that are available to an artist to express his/her viewpoint.

Sometimes I use different media out of necessity. When I used myself as the character in part of Another Shocking Psychological Thriller and some photographs, it was because I couldn’t find the right film clip or image and had to come up with another way of making it happen. Conceptually, it wasn’t important that the woman was me. I was the most available person, and since I knew what I wanted, I didn’t have to direct someone else. Another reason I use different media is that I became more interested in immersing the viewer in my work. Visual aspects, with sound, movement, and even smell affect many more senses, and tend to affect people on different emotional levels.

Could you elaborate on your strategy of immersion – in particular the importance of verisimilitude with regard to the installations?

With my work it’s important that the sculptures have a sense that they are “real.” Something has to separate them from being dollhouses or models. When I add video (usually clips from films) and sound (music, clips of conversations), it brings in another
level of reality and context that takes the pieces even further from
the idea of a dollhouse. For instance, in Zaragoza y Obregon, a
sculpture of a few blocks in Los Cabos, the top window in the
hotel shows a clip from Y Tu Mama Tambien in which the older
woman and younger man are having sex. The choice of film clips
can change the idea of a whole piece, and adds another layer of
meaning on top of the layers of sound and visual construction.
By adding scenes and conversations that are part of daily life
– from the mundane to the extreme – it seems to add contrast
to the sometimes “sweet” idea of a miniature. The more layers
of meaning that I can add to a sculpture or installation, the closer
it comes to capturing the reality of life, which is never one-
dimensional.

How do you begin to form a narrative via your selection of
appropriated film clips? Typically you install these within the
sculptures and one gets the sense that they are not meant
to be watched, but rather seen. Do they serve as a sort of
punctuation to your overall idea?

It really depends on the piece. For Big El Mirador, a 7-foot tall hotel
sculpture with six video windows, I wanted to use old Spanish-
language Bunuel films. So, I rented all the ones I could find, and
started watching and saving clips on my computer that were
interesting and dramatic. Since there were six different videos
in the piece that would play at once, I make six video tracks in
my video program on the computer, and start filling them in like
a puzzle. It’s really fun, and often a challenge. Sometimes, when
starting to build a sculpture, I already have certain films in mind.
Other times, I will know I want a certain type of scene, such as a
bathrub scene, so I’ll do a search on the internet movie database,
rent lots of DVDs, and scan them for a appropriate scene.

Depending upon the sculpture or installation, the films can act in
one of two ways – sometimes there is a storyline, and other times
the clip just shows a commonplace scene of everyday life, meant
to add another layer to the whole piece.

For the most part, my work is about people and place. The
addition of film clips and soundtracks helps add life and motion to
the work. As for the sculptures and installations that relate more
directly to film, it depends on the piece. They are usually more
like explorations of film or a genre of film than critiques, although
sometimes that works its way in.

Would you allow then that your work is a critique of cinematic
tropes?

In some aspect of Another Shocking Psychological Thriller the
role of women in 1950s films is critiqued. Also, I recently did an
installation in Brusseles of four different houses from horror films.
It’s called Last House on the Left. The houses line up along a street
and look rather calm and serene. Yet when looking in the houses,
they are disturbing. Blood is everywhere in the Nightmare on Elm
Street house, screams and an attack in the closet can be seen in
the Halloween house, birds attack people in The Birds house, and
the priest is swarmed by bees in The Amityville Horror house. The
installation is both a celebration of horror films and a critique on
the over-the-top violence found in these films and in our culture.
It’s also about the idea that one can never be sure of what’s
happening behind closed doors on a quiet, seemingly peaceful
tree-lined street.
by Michelle White  

I wonder what Marshall McLuhan, the godfather of media studies, might say about the blurry photographs that we take with our camera phones. A form of shorthand image making, and an even quicker way to transmit data than the abbreviated language of text messaging, they epitomize technology’s continual influence on how we see and understand the world via the way we encounter and use images. As the theorist famously wrote to articulate how the medium is indeed the message, “With telephone and TV it is not so much the message as the sender that is ‘sent.’” Yet it is still easy to ask if the format of those grainy shots of my friends in bars that I never know what to do with, or my cousin’s kid doing something cute when a “real” camera can’t be found, matter. Waiting to be historicized, or even critically analyzed, they spend most of the time living in the limbo of a phone’s memory.

For this year’s SPIn, a one night event this past August called Txt Me L8r, Aurora Picture Show and the Houston Center for Photography harnessed this ubiquitous and undefined medium. The premise, to capture and display photos made with the camera phone, was a celebration, and more importantly, an affirmation of the beautiful irreverence of the fleeting format. In the gallery there were two projection screens. One flashed camera phone pics by selected artists who had been asked to respond to an assignment: "say goodbye." The other screen showcased the assignments guests were asked to complete on their own phones that night. At the entrance you were handed a cellular task. “Take a photo of people kissing,” was one. Other instructions requested that you capture an image of a funny dance move, the interior of someone’s handbag, the trash, someone who looks like a celebrity. After taking the mobile photo, you sent it to a flickr-uploading site. The images were projected as a slide show in the middle of the gallery and the site was continually refreshed as contributions came in throughout the evening. People got into the groove, and the seduction of the big screen compelled some to even send in latent photos of their cats that had been lying dormant in their phone’s hard drive. Here, everyone one was the artist and the subject, and the activity provided to some of the most enthusiastic guests that unstructured, including myself, thrilling moments of artistic glory.

My assignment was to “take a photograph of your best exercise move.” I had some friends pose for me under the parking lot lights outside of the gallery. Gina clung to her boyfriend’s shoulders, and in an exaggerated gesture she threw her left knee in Seth’s groin. Thanks to the fingerprints and grime of collected dust and ink on the bottom of my motorola razor phone, the projected result was an erotic and dreamy dance. I was quite proud an effect which I would like to call the intended romantic and atmospheric haze of my technical mastery.

while some of the arty-party-goers learned they could easily be art-stars with a medium everyone keeps in their pocket, it wasn’t just about turning the phone photo into “art.” As the images moved across the screen as magnified versions of how we typically see them on our computer screens through digital photo sharing networking sites, the installation became a collectively produced work of art in a white cube, the domain of the individual artist. The shift of context was ironic and hilarious. Our daily participation in a communal way of experiencing and processing images, and the way we are all implicated as outsourced anonymous producers of cultural forms in a complex network of information, was paradoxically amplified by the interactive experiment.

The event came only weeks after the release of the iPhone. Some exceptionally (and suspiciously) crisp photos slipped into the show. Prophetic of the advent of yet another obsolescent technology, their clarity and lack of magical and unintentional low-fi effects that comes from technological magnificence, was boring. I was suddenly nostalgic for a medium I always thought was superfluous, and that I suddenly learned to love.

Txt Me L8r was on view at HCP from August 24-26, 2007. For more information on Aurora Picture Show, visit www.aurorapictureshow.org.
Born in Montreal and growing up in the suburbs, Carlos Sanchez (b. 1976) and Jason Sanchez (b. 1981) began collaborating in 2001, shortly before they received their first grant from the Du Maurier Arts Council. A second Du Maurier grant allowed them to end their respective studies at Concordia University in Montreal in 2003 and work “seven days a week” on their art. Actually, the collaboration began earlier, with Carlos behind the camera and Jason and his friends serving as models for a series of staged color works. But the works for which they have become known and which are exhibited now at the Houston Center for Photography began when both moved behind the lens. Their first solo exhibition was in 2002 and they’ve produced and exhibited steadily since, publishing their second book in 2007.

They spend several months in pre-execution: researching the topic, refining the concept, planning and building sets, acquiring or building props, hiring necessary technical staff, and carefully determining the color palette of each scene. Their models are largely family and friends. Shooting a picture can take hours. Mostly, they shoot exteriors or build sets in their studio, which requires many skills other than those necessary for the photographs, including set designing, carpentry, lighting, stage directing, etc. Post-production is done digitally. Each image is produced in contemporary sizes – 42” x 74”, 24” x 96”, 60” x 76” – and limited editions of five or six. Interview by Anne Wilkes Tucker

Anne Tucker: Do you sketch a scene, create a preliminary sketch in a computer, or is the “stage” also your sketchpad?

Carlos: Neither of us is very good with drawing. When we are planning a set we like to go into the studio and take out our 4 x 8’ panels and place them how we think the room should look. This is much simpler for us because a drawing might look nice on paper, but in the end, it might not convey the reality we seek. So, placing the panels in our studio and making a rough room design is what we find most affective.

CS: We had a back-up piñata made in case the main one was damaged. We also thought that we would change the piñata before each image was taken, but in the end, we let the piñata “bleed” for 5 or 6 takes before having to refill it with new blood.

JS: There were many logistical concerns when making a solid piñata that wouldn’t break after multiple beatings from the children as well as one that would bleed to our liking.

Easter Party was the first of many shoots that involved working with a special effects company in Montreal called Cineffects. Occasionally, such as with Motive for Change (2004), you create the final image from multiple negatives, but usually, there is one basic shot that may then be modified in the camera. This greatly increases the pre-production work and the exactitude of your staging. What considerations drive that decision to make the event happen, i.e. blood pooling below the piñata, rather than create it digitally?

CS: For the blood from the piñata, the thought of creating it digitally never crossed our minds. Wherever possible, we create the desired action in camera. We have never really created anything digitally. Digital tools are mostly used to bring multiple pieces together seamlessly or tweak colors, contrast etc.

Reality Interrupted: Carlos and Jason Sanchez

Descent
Montréal, 2003, Digital C-Print
46 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the Artists and Christopher Cutts Gallery (Toronto)

Carlos and Jason Sanchez

Descent
Montréal, 2003, Digital C-Print
46 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the Artists and Christopher Cutts Gallery (Toronto)
Spot

frequently a child or an adolescent is afraid or in some kind of me your earlier works largely center on young people and that feel, hear, and read.

JS: I’m still pulling inspiration from my surroundings – things I see, interest me might become the source of an image.

CS: These days my inspirations come mostly from what’s going on around me. It can also come through the news, the radio, Internet, a book, etc. Anything that catches my attention and continues to around me. It can also come through the news, the radio, Internet, etc. Anything that catches my attention and continues to interest me might become the source of an image.

JS: I’m still pulling inspiration from my surroundings – things I see, feel, hear, and read.

We are only talking about seven years of work, but it seems to me your earlier works largely center on young people and that frequently a child or an adolescent is afraid or in some kind of physical or developmental risk. In Pink Bathroom (2001), a wet, naked boy anxiously peers around a pink tile wall with the torn shower curtain to his left. This is one of your earliest works. What was its source of inspiration? Was it an event or a feeling?

CS: When we started making the early images, our process was more freestyle. We would often find interesting locations, and then find a way to construct an image in them. In the case of Pink Bathroom, we were looking for a location to shoot another image when we came across this actual pink bathroom. We liked the space and created a scenario that would work well with the location.

JS: In our early work we were very interested in creating images that could have been considered as film stills. We liked the idea of creating a fragment of a longer narrative, allowing the viewers to fill in the gaps and create storylines in their minds. We no longer think about our work the same way we used to, although some people may feel that our images do resemble film stills. Instead, we focus on the content of our images to portray the emotional and psychological sides of the subjects we work with.

Two of the most often reproduced of your pictures are Easter Party (2003) and The Baptism (2004), both of which feature family moments, religious themes, and a disconcerting appearance of blood where none was expected or is even seemingly perceived by the adults. Do you discuss symbolism?

JS: The blood in both images is symbolic. In Easter Party, the young protagonist is participating in a tradition in which the children of his family symbolically sacrifice a lamb to God by making a lamb shaped piñata and hitting it with a wooden ax until it tears open and expels its candy filled insides. In biblical times the actual sacrifice of a lamb was performed to obtain forgiveness for the sins of the families who performed the act. The boy in our image is aware of the underlying spider webs of truth that exist within his family and is acting for their wellbeing by imagining that he is sacrificing an actual lamb.

In The Baptism, I feel the blood foreshadows the child’s future. We, the viewers, are privileged to catch a glimpse of this moment while his entourage marvels at the baby’s initiation into the Christian faith.

Often there are multiple possible meanings. As Catherine Somzé observes, “In The Baptism, is it the contact with the crown of the child that causes the water to change into blood? (Is the child cleansed of his original sin?) Or is it, on the contrary, the water running down his crown that wounds him and brings the blood gushing forth? (Would sin then here be the true act of baptism?)”

Do you discuss issues such as these? Are you pleased or indifferent to speculations such as these?

CS: I am always pleased when people make up their own stories about the images and about their meanings. I actually find it most interesting when their take on it differs from mine.

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CS: I am always pleased when people make up their own stories about the images and about their meanings. I actually find it most interesting when their take on it differs from mine.

JS: It is not important for me to discuss and give my interpretation on every element of my work. I prefer leaving certain things ambiguous, allowing room for interpretation. It is more important to me that the viewer has their own experience when looking at our images and not one influenced about what we think that they should think or feel.

In the newest works, the focus is less adolescence in the familial realm and more situated in a broader societal context. In Masked (2007), we can’t know the age of the young man admiring his newly created stocking mask, with the scissors that cut the eyeholes dropped on the rug. In fact there is less and less that we can know in these new pictures. In Identification (2007), we ask: Who is dead? Why are these people in a morgue? What is their relationship? I can think of a host of other questions. Are you intentionally pushing ambiguity?

CS: We like to be subtle, but give clues that are not necessarily in your face. I find an image to be much more powerful when it doesn’t spell out the whole meaning for you.
JS: It is important to create images that don’t reveal too much upon first viewing. Like any good movie or music album, the more you focus on the material, the more you get out of it. It is our aim to create work that has a similar effect.

Given the parallels to cinema in your work, it is not surprising that you made Between Life and Death (2006), an installation that places a holographic video of a woman’s near-death experience inside the carcass of a bus that actually crashed. Are you planning more installations and use of moving images?

CS: We have talked about it and have ideas about what we would do, so yes, I believe that we will definitely use moving images again.

JS: I feel that film is one of the strongest and most powerful mediums of expression, one that I am definitely interested in pursuing.

AT: Your titles are important. Sometimes, it may state the obvious, such as Overflowing Sink (2002), but in this case “overflowing” is an understatement. Deluge might be a more accurate description. Sometimes, words are directive, such as The Hurried Child (2005), which actually refers to psychologist David Elkins book of the same title. The subtitle of the book is Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon, and your photograph of the child in tart’s make-up reminds most viewers of Jon Benét Ramsey. In the case of Principles (2005), the title plays with meanings in similarly sounding words as the scene portrays a school principal, sitting with whiskey and a cigar and a student-age girl roughing his hair. At what stage do titles enter the process? Is one of you better than the other with words? Do titles morph as the project evolves?

CS: I would say that most the time the title of the piece is often known before we shoot the work. If during the pre-production or production stage when a title is not yet determined, we will use a working title while we are making it. For example, we referred to Identification as the morgue shot. Usually, the title is finalized during post-production. As for who makes up the titles, if one of us comes up with a better name, we use it, and that usually is how it works.

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Reality Interrupted: The Cinematic Work of the Sanchez Brothers is on view at HCP from November 2 – December 23, 2007.
Leaders of Houston Cultura, by Chuy Benitez. This portrait series provides a photographic index of the previously undocumented Mexican-American and Spanish-speaking cultural leadership of Houston. The series takes environmental portraiture to its extreme: each subject is depicted within a fish-eyed, 360-degree perspective of a space that s/he has chosen to represent his/her personality. Thus far, Benitez has made 30 of a projected 100 portraits of cultural leaders – political activists, environmental activists, college professors, literary authors, musical talents, and successful entrepreneurs. The series is on display through January 20, 2008 at Project Rowhouse in Houston.

360° Portraits
Juan is an environmental activist, community leader, and the founder of Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (TEJAS), an environmental justice organization committed to the promotion of environmental rights in communities of color and low-income populations in Texas and Louisiana.
Photography at Documenta 12 and the 52nd Venice Biennale by Miranda Lash

It’s 2007 and the dominant theme for the two largest international art exhibitions this year is a plea for no theme at all.

In their catalog for Documenta 12, spouses Roger Buergel, artistic director, and Ruth Noack, curator, proclaim, “the big exhibition has no form.” Indeed, they readily admit that the “radical formlessness” of Documenta is likely to “challenge” most people. Yet out of this formlessness, they hope, comes freedom. Omitting the artists’ nationalities from the object labels, the viewer is liberated from preconceived expectations. Appropriately post-modern in their acknowledgement of “local histories” in art, Buergel and Noack’s seemingly post-post-modern faith hinges on viewers reaching “a plateau where art communicates itself and on its own terms.”

At the 52nd Venice Biennale, Think with the Senses–Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense, the curatorial statement of the artistic director, Robert Storr, strikes a similar chord. “This exhibition is not based on an all-encompassing ideological or theoretical proposal,” he explains. Each work carries its own distinct message: it is, in Storr’s words, “there to speak for itself.” The correspondences his visitors draw between the works will drum up a diversity of thoughts and emotions that echo the very diversity from which the art comes.

How then, should a sore-footed gallery trotter approach works of photography at these two massive exhibitions? In singling out photography I should clarify that this medium was not segregated in the exhibitions from other mediums. One can argue, however, that purported “themelessness” of this year’s Documenta and Venice Biennale influenced the choices of photography on display. Beginning with Storr, Buergel and Noack’s premise that in order for the exhibitions to succeed, art must be communicative, the resulting selections of photography are overwhelmingly representational and documentary in nature. Most photographs are presented as testimonies of “what it looks like there” and the “there” presented is usually a politicized location.

Take for example Gabriele Basilico’s photos of bullet riddled buildings in Beirut from 1991 or Elaine Tedesco’s photos of sentry boxes or guaritas in Brazil from 2006 (both shown in the Biennale). In both cases a crystal clear image transports us to another place, a guarded place, and in the case of Basilico, a violated place: places that should arouse our concern. In Lidwien Van de Ven’s full-room installation at Documenta, large-scale prints of Jerusalem and Qalqilya were chosen for their resonance with ongoing conflicts between different religious groups in the Middle East. Meanwhile Guy Tillim’s photographs, also at Documenta, depict the Democratic Republic of Congo in turmoil. Political billboards are shown burning while presidential candidates walk closely flanked by bodyguards.

Using photographs as indexical documents is an age-old practice, one that fosters a connection between the viewer to that which “must have been,” as Roland Barthes wrote in Camera Lucida. In her Biennale piece Material for a Film, Emily Jacir collects and makes photographs relating to her interest in the Palestinian writer Wael Zuaiter, who was killed by Israelis in Rome in 1972. Fascinated by Zuaiter’s desire to translate A Thousand and One Nights from Arabic to Italian, Jacir retraces Zuaiter’s life through old photographs (among other documents). To this she adds her own photographic records of the exact streets and buildings where he lived. The images act as links of evidence in her investigation of his life: “Where were the Mossad agents hiding?” she wondered while snapping the shutter. Back at Documenta, the historic actions of an entirely different group of intellectuals were commemorated through the photographs taken and collected by Graciela Carnevale. Having locked her visitors into an art gallery in 1968, Carnevale’s image captures a woman in Rosario timidly emerging through the broken glass of a storefront window. An early member of the group of Argentinean artists who visited the Tucumán province in the
Exhibition Review

“...The media might manipulate and overwhelm us with images,...”

1960s to document the poverty caused by the closure of the sugar mills, Carnevale collected their photographs, newspaper clippings, and posters. These were used to recreate parts of the 1968 exhibition Tucumán Arde. Translated as “Tucumán is burning” the protest exhibition was the final stage of a project in which artists used film and photographs to document the deplorable conditions of the province.

My qualm is not with realist photographs that are used in the service of a political agenda. My concern, rather is that neither of these exhibitions of contemporary art put much effort into exploring how the medium of photography is also a contingent, malleable, and experimental medium of persuasion, manipulation, and selectivity. In our time it is easy to point to the treachery of the media in contorting and filtering information. The media might manipulate and overwhelm us with images, but these photographs, Bruegel, Noack, and Storr, imply, are honest truths, made all the more honest because they come from an artist. “The crisp legibility” of Jan Christian Braun’s photographs of kitschy decorated tombstones, Starr writes, makes him guiltless of any “condescension.” Braun is simply recording in an aesthetically pure way what it looks like there, in a New York cemetery.

There were, of course, multiple exceptions to my complaint. The Biennale’s darling, Sophie Calle, featured both in Starr’s Padiglione Italia and the French Pavilion, as usual had some tricks up her sleeve. Calle’s piece on the death of her mother, Couldn’t Capture Death, admittedly contained a video, but was nonetheless a stunning commentary on the function of photography. The screen featuring Calle’s mother during the hours preceding her demise captures a motionless sleeping face, which appears at most moments to be a back-lit photograph. Occasional hands feeling her pulse are the only indication that the image is a recording over time. The tragic stillness of the image, taken at the junction between life and death, evokes Barthes’ idea of the “little death” in photography – the death of a moment that will never come again. The actual death of Calle’s mother signals the transition of a living being into an entity visible only through photographs.

The more playful, theatrical side of photography is explored in Calle’s installation Take Care of Yourself. The title is borrowed from the last line in her ex-lover’s break-up letter. In an attempt to make sense of her ex’s cryptic missive, she asked over a hundred women, all of different professions, to interpret the letter in their own way. The blown-up letters appeared alongside photographs of the women reading the letter. “Captured” in their most native environments, the women assume a deliberate pose of deep reflection. The planned, performed moment depicted emphasizes the process of interpretation and empathy. The objective presentation of a spontaneous reality is rendered as questionable as an impartial reading of a love letter.

Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany was on view from June 10 through September 23, 2007. The 52nd Venice Biennale, Think with the Senses–Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense runs from June 16 through November 21, 2007.

I had high expectations for Perspectives 158, Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Nipper’s first solo museum show in the United States, on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Nipper has so far created a promising body of work focused on the themes of time, space, and continuity, which she explores through “experiments testing the limits of human perception and control. Her photographs, videos, and performances are often complex affairs involving professional dancers, months of preparation, and intricately-planned scripts. But this sparse exhibition at the CAMH is a poor introduction to the artist’s work. It’s a lovely work.

The leitmotif of Perspectives 158 is an ice-coated wire mobile that appeared previously in Bending Water into a Heart Shape. Nipper’s show-stopping four-channel video featured last year in the United States, on view at the Blaffer Gallery. In Bending Water (not on view at the CAMH), a dancer performs a figure-skating jump at an excruciatingly slow pace. Rather than manipulating the speed of the video, Nipper records the dancer in real time as she executes the jump over the course of an hour, a feat requiring enormous mental and physical control (and apparently extensive training in a form of martial arts called Ba Gua).

The dancer’s exertions are obvious from her facial expressions and her missteps as her muscles fail during extended passes. The video also includes the wire mobile, which is hung with beads of ice. As the ice melts, the mobile is thrown momentarily off-kilter, resulting in unpredictable movements that resonate with the dancer’s halting performance. The videos suggest the spontaneous moments of imbalance that interrupt periods of sustained elemental, physical, and mental stability. It’s a lovely work.

In Perspectives 158, digital screen grabs of the mobile from Bending Water are recycled as Weather Center, and the same mobile makes a guest appearance alongside recording equipment in Love with the Sound Technician. Nipper views the mobile as a bridge between her older work and her new series, but the connection feels forced, and any sense of transformation that the melting ice might have expressed is absent. As a result, these flat and static photographs lack the dynamism and humor of Bending Water. Nipper’s complex, research-fueled concepts are among the strengths of her work. But when no explanatory labels are present to explain the story behind the pieces, her work can be rather inaccessible to viewers. Such is the case with a diptych of a girl and a thermometer (also part of Weather Center), which suffers from a lack of context. In this respect, Nipper exemplifies a trend in contemporary photography in which the concept is as important as – if not more important than – the visual impact of the images. “I’m more interested in the process of making the work than with the outcome,” Nipper said in an interview with SPOT.

The show has highlights too. The video An Arrangement for the Architect and a Darkroom Timer, which was proposed as a part of Perspectives 158 but was not included for various technical and budgetary reasons. Perhaps that piece would have injected some drama into the gallery and connected the other works. As it stands, viewers are left to experience a rather less pleasant feeling of absence than Nipper dreamed.

### Perspectives 158: Kelly Nipper

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston by Leah DeVun

**left:** Kelly Nipper

*Weather Center, 2006*  
Framed chromogenic print  
22 1/2 x 30 1/4 inches  
Courtesy francesca kaufmann, Milan.

**center:** Kelly Nipper

*An Arrangement for the Architect and a Darkroom Timer (detail), 2005*  
Two-channel video installation, 60 minutes  
Color, sound, installation dimensions variable  
Courtesy francesca kaufmann, Milan.

**right:** Kelly Nipper

*Evergreen, 2004 (B)*  
framed chromogenic print  
48 5/16 x 60 inches  
Courtesy francesca kaufmann, Milan.

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Book Review by Peter Brown


The book itself is subtle, beautiful and useful. It is relatively small; its cover understated; its type-written-like font unsassuming and its pages filled with a gallery of astonishingly well-reproduced photographs. These pictures both illustrate and define its content. Each paragraph is built around Shore’s analytic text. The book’s design includes a good deal of white space, and the images (which run from anonymous pictures, to Watkins, to Evans, to Struth) breathe easily – both as stand-ins for ideas, and resonant in their own right.

John Szarkowski’s 1966 book The Photographer's Eye apparently inspired the idea for The Nature of Photographs, and there are certain parallels. The book’s initial purpose was relatively simple: to introduce Shore’s students to the qualities photographs inherently possess. And as an introduction to the basic properties of photographic images, I know of no book published recently which compares. It deals with a body of thought conventional photographic texts gloss over, and it would make sense to publish a paperback edition for classroom use.

Although clearly written, The Nature of Photographs is not light fare, and I often found myself rereading passages. The prose is spare and unemotional and the book does often come across as a primer. Succinctly, Shore thinks of photographic images as possessing three distinct levels: The Physical, The Depictive and The Mental. Although these particular terms would not have occurred to me in this context, they serve well.

In Shore’s lexicon, The Physical Level refers to the actual stuff of the photograph – the kind of print, the backing, whether it’s black and white or color, the size – the object itself. The Depictive Level refers to the photographer’s decision making process, as well as the viewer’s interpretation of these decisions: vantage point, framing, timing and focus. The Mental Level comes into play with the transition of the image on the wall or on the page – wherever the photograph is encountered – to its new residence in a viewer’s mind. While all of this may seem a bit self-evident, the detail that Shore goes into is not, and there is much to consider.

He is clear about what the book is and what it is not. He does not deal with content or meaning – which for most of us is central to the enjoyment of a photograph. On the contrary, he plays his own responses to the images in the book remarkably close to the vest. “The aim of this book,” he writes, “…is not to explore photographic content but to describe physical and formal attributes of a photographic print that form the tools a photographer uses to define and interpret that content.” Within these boundaries, the book is clear and often illuminating.

It would be fascinating to see Shore take on a second book, one that might parallel Szarkowski’s Looking At Photographs – a classic in speculative content. I’d be interested to hear what Shore has to say about the reading of images, about photographic narrative. Perhaps he feels, as some do, that photographs should stay word free – luminating in silence. In this case of course there would be little to write. But, either an essay debunking interpretive thought, or a second beautifully illustrated book, would find many readers.


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Book Review by Miranda Lash

Susan Kismaric

Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg


184 pages, $50.00

Time and rupture are central themes in the work of JoAnn Verburg. In her diptychs, triptychs, and series of photographs, a story is told in the gaps between each picture. In 3 x Jim (1989), for example, we are given three portraits of the same man, each seemingly reflecting a distinct moment in his thought process. Each extract has the ability to function independently, yet they are unified into a single composition. The division of this moment into three frames emphasizes the time spent as the eye moves over the scene, resting on different snatches of reality, while the brain formulates an overall impression. The result is an experience that teeters between a narrative and a fragment of memory. This sense of rupture, Susan Kismaric argues, comes not only from the breaks between the picture frames, but from the distance emphasized between the viewer and the interiority of the sitter. The pauses, she claims, echo our inability to transcend our “fundamental aloneness” (36).

In her exhibition catalog Present Tense: Photographs by JoAnn Verburg, Kismaric, curator of photography at MoMA, focuses on three series by Verburg: black and white portraits from the early 1980s; still lifes and portraits of her husband Jim from 1991 to 2003; and photographs of olive trees from 1995 forward. Taking the reader through Verburg’s biography, we learn that time and rupture were central concerns in her artistic development. Her MA thesis exhibition at George Eastman House, entitled “Locations in Time,” incorporated work by photographers, including John Baldessari and Aleksandr Rodchenko, who dealt with temporality through serial frames. In her “Rapho-photographic Survey Project,” done in collaboration with Mark Klett and Ellen Manchester in 1977, Verburg retraces the steps of the American landscape photographers William Henry Jackson and Timothy O’Sullivan. Taking pictures at the same locations as her predecessors, the irreversible effects of settlement in the West become clear through comparisons between Jackson and Verburg’s photographs.

Kismaric, using ample quotes from the artist, does an admirable job of probing Verburg’s ruptures, as they relate to types of personal disconnect, and as they pertain to Verburg’s interest in “a world outside the frame” (28). The plates in the catalog also play with Verburg’s idea of repetition and interruption: they offer multiple views of the same work, views of the work installed, and large details spread across the book binding. What could be probed further, however, is how Verburg’s depictions of everyday moments are arguments in themselves about how reality can be selectively represented and even heightened. Kismaric makes a key mistake in arguing that Verburg’s “ultimate subject” is “the creation of non-theatrical space that functions as a threshold to experience” (12). In First Day Back in Italy (Pisa), 1998, Verburg’s attention to composition, accomplished through the startling closeness of fruit and crumpled paper, accents of color, and the positioning of the sitter in the background, evokes a theatre tableau. Verburg’s life-size prints, figure poses, and sharp, vivid focuses, convey, but also poetically human experience. Through her subject matter is quotidian, her technique elevates the moment into something exceptional.

The corresponding exhibition is on view at The Museum of Modern Art July 15 through November 5, 2007 and at the Walker Art Center January 12 through April 20, 2008.
Almost Safe by Anthony Goicolea. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum quis nostrud exercitation.
Portfolio

Anthony Goicolea
North Bank
2007, black and white photograph
mounted on aluminum and laminated
with non-glare Plexiglas
72 x 94 inches
Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York

Anthony Goicolea
Deconstruction
2007, black and white photograph
mounted on aluminum and laminated
with non-glare Plexiglas
72 x 117.5 inches
Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York
The age of the digital Brownie Camera has arrived.

We churn out thousands of images and stuff—photo software with shots of family vacations, dogs, and children's bare bottoms in the kiddie pool. Like all good collectors, we file away the valuable moments in folders with names like “Christmas 05.” With computers and digital cameras, we seem to take pictures less and spend more time filing, sorting, bookmarking, resizing and resending. Despite our best efforts, though, our computers and websites become just as messy as an old shoebox full of photos: they may be digital shoeboxes, but they are still musty and disorganized.

And with an estimated 29.7 billion pages on World Wide Web, we face a new problem: how to keep up with a relentlessly accumulating photographic record. In her essay “The Dematerialization of Screen Space,” Jessica Helfand speaks about how Internet “space” is still confined to the frame of the monitor and the definitions of programming language—and yet constantly changes its identity and technical boundaries to adapt to new economies. This adaptation is particularly relevant in relationship to photography because of the proliferation of webzines, blogs and virtual galleries that showcase photography.

To cope with the explosion of imagery, we, like a good mixed cocktail drink, are now one part artist mixed with one part curator. In a world where parents buy children URLs for their birthdays, the debate is not if a shift in how we digest photography has occurred, but simply how to keep up with a relentlessly compounding photographic record. We bookmark our “faves,” e-mail images to our friends, and upload pictures of our children to our blogs—we are the world it is waiting to see. The unwieldy barrage of unfettered images makes it difficult to manage any digital shoebox. This is compounded by the fact that simply placing an image on the Internet gives it credibility. Everyone on the Internet becomes an expert. In an age of Flickr, Wikipedia and Blogger, where value and worth are measured in “hits,” Stephan’s secret fan blog to Lindsey Lohan (http://humbleartsfoundation.org) here we provide our own list of bookmarks and favorite photographers have influenced this newer generation.”

Another blog that has a simple layout with a beautiful selection of photographs and insightful commentary is muse-ings (http://photo-muse.blogspot.com). Created in December 2006 by Tim Attenor, it presents “[h]ot thoughts on photography and what inspires it—books, poetry, film, art. And various other ramblings.”

Flickr (http://flickr.com) is a blog that pushes the boundaries of how we use the Internet to look at art. It was launched in December 2003 and uploads new posts Monday through Friday, with curated virtual exhibits on the weekends. You can even sign up for an art daily digest and receive an e-mail with photographs and special section highlights. For Andy Adams, a photographer based in Madison, Wisconsin and the editor of this site, “Flickr is part web photography magazine, part photoblog. It aims to promote interesting visual approaches to seeing the world and celebrates the art of exhibiting quality photography on the web.”

"I thought he summed it up well when he said, “I continue to be fascinated by the editor/curator end of things and also the ongoing development of the webprint/gallery hybrid, so it’s been a fun way to explore the possibilities of what I consider to be an endlessly entertaining medium. The world of photography is just ripe with publishing possibilities these days, no?”

Simply Photo (http://simplyphoto.blogspot.com) is a blog that has “inspirations about photography, design, food and fashion.”

We like that the author, known only as Jen, not only posts beautiful images, but also lets us in on non-photography aspects of her life—it really feels like we have gained access to her personal journal. She links her own images to Flickr and highlights other photographers from Flickr as well.

We include Flickr (http://flickr.com) and YouTube (http://youtube.com) on our list because they function much like blogs, allowing anyone to upload his or her photographs and videos without an overlying administrative agenda. Many artists link to Flickr and YouTube from their personal websites as a way of easily managing their content.

The websites we have featured here represent a tiny fraction of art-related sites, but they are ones that excel at expressing a photographic voice or vision. While our daughter’s dance recital page on Flickr may only have four hits, we are sure that you will enjoy visiting our favorite websites—and that perhaps they will end up on your bookmark list.
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