Jay DeFeo

Where the Swan Flies

March 7 - April 26, 2008
Exhibition Catalogue Available

MOODY GALLERY
2815 COLQUITT HOUSTON, TX 77098
tel 713-526-9911 fax 713-526-7749

William Christenberry

February 23 - April 5, 2008

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2815 COLQUITT HOUSTON, TX 77098
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PHOTOGRAPHY FROM CHINA, 1934-2008

MARCH 7-APRIL 20, 2008
HOUSTON, TX, USA

www.fotofest.org
When William Henry Fox Talbot described photography in 1844 as a “pencil of nature,” he was in part attempting to distinguish the function of photography from painting. Since then, photography has been used as the basis for factual evidence and as an artistic means for engaging with reality. In the twenty-first century, however, the role of photography as a distinct medium grows increasingly blurry. Video and Internet-based media are shifting the role of the camera into other categories. Photos now look like paintings. Paintings and drawings are now based on photographs. The new challenge will be either to define where the “photography” element begins and ends, or to explain why this categorization is no longer relevant. In this issue of SPOT we look at several artists and critics who are tangling with these questions, from Josephine Meckseper, whose work moves between found images and objects, to Jeff Bark, who struggles against defining his romantic scenes as purely painterly. With one of this year’s FotoFest themes being “Transformations,” it seems relevant to consider how the “Foto” itself is evolving. To begin this issue, which we are pleased to report will have an expanded distribution of 10,000, we thought it best to fuse a little of the old and the new. SPOT’s founding editor David Crossley writes on the origins of HCP, while Madeline Yal, HCP director and curator, updates us on programming and exhibitions to look forward to this spring. SPOT is also branching in a new direction by initiating a series on photography collections based in Texas. For our first installment, please enjoy a sampling from Mark Fehr Haukohl’s collection of twenty-first-century photography by European women. We are very proud and grateful to debut these unique holdings in print.

Through continuing discussions we agreed SPOT should sustain its growing commitment to covering photography and related media throughout the world as a journal of critique, reflection, and reportage. For this reason, we are pleased to have Titus O’Brien report on the latest photography trends at the art fairs in Miami. Aaron Schuman writes on Taryn Simon’s national photographic project, and Clare Elliott investigates William Christenberry’s studio practices in Washington, D.C. SPOT also previews two exhibitions which will appear at HCP in March: Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao’s Habitat 7, a photo-essay on New York’s subway line and Ministered in China, a provocative documentary project curated by Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas. Throughout this process I learned a great deal from working with the photography connoisseurs, and I wish to express my gratitude to Madeline and David for this opportunity. Every publication has its silent warrior, and for this issue it was Mya Bremborg, SPOT’s departing manager. We wish her the very best in New York. At the same time, SPOT extends a warm welcome to Leigh Boone, HCP’s new executive assistant. Go get ‘em, Leigh! To everyone involved, for his or her insights and talents, thank you.

Miranda Lash
Guest Editor for the Houston Center for Photography
Spring/Summer 2008 at HCP

Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste natus error sit voluptatem accusantium doloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam, eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt explicabo. Nemo enim ipsam voluptatem quia voluptas sit aspernatur aut odit aut fugit, sed quia consequuntur magni dolores eos qui ratione voluptatem sequi nesciunt. Neque porro quisquam est, qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur, adipisci velit, sed quia non numquam eius modi tempora incidunt ut labore et dolore magnam aliquam quaerat voluptatem. Ut enim ad minima veniam, quis nostrum exercitationem ullam corporis suscipit laboriosam, nisi ut aliquid ex ea commodi consequatur, excepturi sint occaecati cupiditate non provident, similique sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollitia animi, id est laborum et dolorum fuga. Et harum quidem rerum facilis est et expedita distinctio. Nam libero tempore, cum soluta nobis est eligendi optio cumque nihil impedit quo minus id quod maxime placeat facere possimus, omnis voluptas assumenda est, omnis dolor repellendus.

February
Feb 21 – March 6 Exhibition
Magnum Photos and Baume & Mercier present Moments in Time

March
March 1, 4 - 5 pm
Book Signing and Artist Lecture - Jonathon Hollingsworth
"What We Think Now"

March 8 – April 20 Exhibitions
Opening Reception: March 9, 6 - 9 pm
Habitat 7 - Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao
Mined in China - Directed by Susan Meiselas and Orville Schell
Native Land - Houston Chinese Photographic Society

March 9, 8 pm
Susan Meiselas “Collaborations” Lecture at DiverseWorks

March 9, 11 am - 5 pm
Intro to Platinum Printing Workshop with Chris McCaw

March 9 and March 14, 3 - 5 pm
HP Print Center Demonstrations
FOTOFEST2008 Exclusive for HCP members and FotoFest attendees

March 10, 7 pm
Habitat 7 - Exhibition Tour with Anne Wilkes Tucker and Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao

March 16, 7 pm
Book Signing and Artist Lecture - Lisa M. Robinson “Snowbound”

April
April 19, 9 am - 4 pm
Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Day with Keith Carter Workshop at HCP

May
May 2 – June 1 Exhibitions
Opening Reception: May 3, 6 - 8 pm
Sleep and Confidence – Mark and France Scully Osterman
Collaborations V Outreach with Houston area high schools

May 3, 9 am - 5 pm
Ambrotypes Workshop with Mark Osterman and France Scully Osterman

May 10 – 11, 10 am - 5 pm
High Dynamic Range Workshop with Dan Burkholder

June
June 13 – July 13 Exhibitions
Opening Reception June 13, 6 - 8 pm
The Personal Collection of John Cleary 26th Anniversary Fellowship Exhibition – Carol Crow Fellowship recipients Mary Magomens & Stephan Hillbrand, juried by Anjali Gupta and Rachel Cook
PictureThis! Work by MD Anderson Children’s Cancer Center Studies

June 14, 11 am - 1 pm
John Cleary Library Naming Ceremony and Celebration

July
July 25, 7 - 11pm
SPIN4 Party

August
August 1 – August 31 Membership Exhibition
Juried by Dr. Alison Nordström

September
September 12 – October 26 Exhibitions
Opening Reception September 12, 6 - 8 pm
Perfectable Worlds – Sage Schur 26th Anniversary Fellowship Exhibition – HCP Fellowship recipient Mike Osborne, juried by Anjali Gupta and Rachel Cook

Call for Entries
Juried by Dr. Alison Nordström
Curator of Photographs at George Eastman House
International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York

Submissions are invited for HCP’s 26th Anniversary Juried Membership Exhibition.

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE:**
Friday, April 4, 2008

**NOTIFICATION DATE:**
May 15, 2008

**EXHIBITION DATES:**
August 1 – August 31, 2008

For rules of entry, eligibility, and submission forms, visit www.hcponline.org

**QUESTIONS?**
Contact Ebony Porter, Program Coordinator at ebony@hcponline.org or 713-529-4755, ext. 13
West of Last Chance

Peter Brown & Kent Haruf

Exhibitions, readings and signings. Brown and Haruf will be present:

January 31 7:30 pm
Denver Center for the Performing Arts
Exhibition coinciding with theatrical production of Plainsong

February 2 6-9 pm
Sandy Carson Gallery, Denver

February 19 5-7 pm
Harris Gallery, Houston

February 21 7 pm
Brazos Bookstore, Houston

February 23 6-9 pm with reading at 7 pm
Stephen L. Clark Gallery, Austin

February 26 5-8 pm Reading 6:30
PDNB Gallery, Dallas

March 7 7 pm
The Tattered Cover, Denver, Colorado

March 10 7:30 pm
Boulder Bookstore, Boulder, Colorado

March 11 6 pm
The Bookworm, Edwards/Vail, Colorado

March 13 7 pm
The King’s English, Salt Lake City, Utah

March 15 4 pm
Book Buffs, Denver, Colorado

Peter Brown’s photographs are available through
Harris Gallery, Houston; Stephen Clark Gallery, Austin; PDNB Gallery, Dallas; Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto; Stephen Cohn Gallery, Los Angeles and The Highland Gallery, Marlta, Texas.
He is the author of the Imogen Cunningham Award winning, Seasons of Light; The Alfred Eisenstaedt Award winning, On the Plains; and the Imogen Cunningham Award winning, West of Last Chance.

Kent Haruf is the author of the National Book Award Nominated Plainsong, the best selling Eventstide and the Whiting Prize winning, The Tie That Binds. When He Once Disobeyed He Lives in Salida Colorado.

Brown and Haruf received the Dorotha Lange – Peter Taylor Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University for their collaborative work on West of Last Chance.

"Our last chance is to love this place. The authors’ desperate strategy for our conversion is not to lie about anything – the jet contrails, the blitzed land, the ubiquitous junk, even the pigs raised so as if they were in Auschwitz. Peter Brown and Kent Haruf also pay attention, however, to sentinel trees, beautiful storms, peaceful space, and occasional heroic survivors who know such things by heart. The authors believe in the remaining glory of this lost geography as much which does not rule out a sense of humor that they ask us just to walk with them. It’s a compassionate invitation."
— Robert Adams, author of Turning Back, A Photographic Journal of Re-discovery

"A book is meant to transport – as faith, devotion, and passion are said to transport – then WEST OF LAST CHANCE represents an achievement of sublime alohomony. By the end, my notions of beauty, space and time were irrevocably altered."
— Mark Schopp, author of An Unfinished Life

“I have never seen a book of photographs quite this profound and honest – rich and austere, horrific and beautiful – nor am I aware of any book that portrays the human and ecological history of the Great Plains with such acumen and heart. Peter Brown’s magnificent photos make clear that our damage, our human dullness, has not yet run its course. And yet, in such a story, how can there not be seeds of resurrection? The text by Kent Haruf confirms those stirrings of spiritual and earthly renewal. One is moved to remember his entry as one would dazzle of poetry, or verses from a holy book – to utter to one’s self, or a loved one, in moments of joy or despair.

This is a major book whose implications and historical significance will increase for years to come."
— Rick Bass, author of The Lives of Rocks

"I was going to say that to look at Peter Brown’s photographs is to want to live in them, but that’s not right because the desire is satisfied by a subtle reversal. Somehow his pictures inhabit the viewer’s brain, take up residence there. WEST OF LAST CHANCE is the latest chapter of a magnificent body of work."
— Geoff Dyer, author of The Ongoing Moment

"The menace in our lives – the way we grow resigned to an interpretation of life’s meaning that causes us to feel futility and vain for being hopeful about anything at all – meets its match in this uncomplimentary overview of a place and how it is peopled. The work here is bravely loving, an offering of truth rather than a pronouncement of it. From Peter Brown’s measured images to Kent Haruf’s hard and tender fictions, to the inspired confluence of the two, WEST OF LAST CHANCE ripples with humor, imagination, respect, and wonder."
— Barry Lopez, author of Arctic Dreams

Available from W. W. Norton & Company

West of Last Chance

Peter Brown & Kent Haruf

by David Crossley

When Anne Tucker, curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, sent out a letter in 1981 asking many of the city’s photographers to get together to talk about the state of photography in Houston, she was reacting in part to a crush of people asking her how we could exhibit more photographs locally. People were hungry for dialogue.

When we all got together at the Paradise Bar & Grill, there was a kind of desperation. We were passionate about photography and wanted to learn from each other and show people what photography was all about.

We talked about founding a new organization, and the Houston Center for Photography was born.

That’s us in the photo above, all lined up with our submissions for the first juried show, full of hope that we’d get a picture in it. A few of us were fairly well established as photographers in the world of exhibitions and academia. At least a couple were famous. A few more had had pictures in exhibitions or publications. Most of us, however, had other jobs, and were just … hoping. Many of us were amateurs, in the best sense of the word.

For a few years, the community was the thing. Meetings were large, lectures were well-attended, and lots of people showed up to build things, paint walls, and hang the exhibitions. The place was half the size it is today, and we were all ambitious about the exhibitions, and the walls were usually densely hung.

We were also curious, so many of the exhibitions each year featured the work of people from far outside Houston. Indeed, early on in 1983, when photographers Wendy Watriss and Fred Baldwin were founding Fotofest, HCP patron Anne S. Brown funded a trip for two of us to see the model for Fotofest, Le Mois de la Photo (The Month of Photography), a Parisian biennial founded in 1980. HCP executive director Lynn McLanahan (now Herbert) and I spent a week in Paris, immersed in the work of the world’s photographers. We both came back full of ideas and energy and began to talk about how the mix of local and global could work.

There was always a desire for HCP to be recognized on a national stage and beyond, but the initial goal was to educate and elevate the work of photographers in our region. Both history and new trends were important, and we struggled for a good mix. History is a little easier to explore than new ideas, of course, because time shapes ideas into understanding. The new, meanwhile, is often challenging to discover and comprehend. Nevertheless, together, the two reveal amazing things.

Today, in its twenty-sixth year, HCP has become a highly professional and respected organization, still seeking to find and display the fresh and new, particularly in the field of art. What we’re seeing now seems to reflect our debased and violent culture. In all directions the exploration of human failure is portrayed, whether through observation of hard reality or through highly constructed concepts evoking difficult ideas.

Is there some means of relief? If all this reeks of despair, is there hope in some other realm? We’ve just recently seen a photograph of the smallest DNA or whatever, and every day we get astonishing new pictures of the universe from the Hubble telescope. People use photography for much more than art, and some of what we’re seeing is exciting, and hopeful.

My experience suggests the purpose of human life is to process information. Turning information into knowledge and even wisdom means putting forward summaries of vast stuff, and of course nothing condenses information like visual images. It seems to me that the challenge is to let us see more of the world – and of other worlds – see all of it, the science, the forbidden, the sports, the news.

Who would have thought, 26 years ago when HCP started, that the ridiculous debate about whether photography could be art would be turned on its head today, when we’re so focused on photographic art that it feels as if we’re missing a lot. If photography can be used to explore all possibilities, are we stretching enough, or are we spending too much energy and time in a dark, apocalyptic vision that seems to be self-fulfilling?"
Who are the best female photographers in Europe? Are they names photography fans would recognize in the United States? These are questions that drive Mark Fehrs Haukohl, native of Milwaukee, resident of Houston, and avid collector of contemporary photography. Acting as president of The Vero Group, Haukohl has dedicated himself since 2000 to attending art fairs, museums, and galleries throughout the European continent, in search of the strongest examples of female photographers’ work by country. Staking his ranking through his purchases, Haukohl continues to build a collection that is diverse in style but rigorously specific in its mission. The selection of works featured in this presentation focus on images which SPOT finds compelling, yet underexposed in the art world.

His holdings range from work by well-established artists such as Marina Abramović, Vanessa Beecroft, Susan Derges, Candida Höfer, Sylvie Fleury, Sarah Pickering, Melanie Manchot, Shirana Shahbazi, and Catherine Yass, to images by artists with little or no international exposure. He enjoys the challenge of finding newer faces in the art world, and as a result has collected work by Alexandra Cristoruo (of Romania), and Anna Ferrer and Cristina Martín Lara (both from Spain). Several of Haukohl’s pieces are extremely rare, such as his Untitled, September 2006, by Hannah Starkey, and Annegret Soltau’s hand-stitched collage Grima-with Cat, No. 208. Despite his plunge into the contemporary, Haukohl remains loyal to his earlier interest in collecting seventeenth-century Italian painting; as evidenced by his love of Elisa Sighicelli’s Untitled (Benevenuto di Giovanni), a back lit photograph of a Sienese Renaissance painting.

“I am not only interested in the surface meaning,” Haukohl says, “but in the second, third, and fourth meaning in an image. How can the work translate to the next art historical level?”

Why focus on women? SPOT asks. “Because this is what I can contribute to art history,” he replies.

European Women Photographers of the 21st Century
from the collection of Mark Haukohl
Referring to Winston Churchill’s famous quote “It was the nation and the race dwelling all round the globe that had the lion heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar,” Haukhol explains, “As far as my collection goes, the great women photographers are out there. I have simply been called upon to give the roar.”

opposite page, left
Heidi Specker
Im Garten – Botschaft, 2004
Pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag
47.2 x 35.4 inches
Courtesy the Artist and Fiedler Contemporary

right
Vera Lutter
Piazza Leoni, Venice, XV: November 20, 2005
Unique gelatin silver print
83.25 x 56 inches
© Vera Lutter. Courtesy the Gagosian Gallery, New York

left
Catriona Grant
Untitled #11 from the series The Examination Room, 2003
Woman lying on shelf in institutional room.
C-print, 1/8
37.5 x 30 inches
Courtesy the Artist

Spiluttini, Margherita (Austria)
Furkapassstrasse, CH, 2001
C-Print, 5/5
120 x 150 cm (47 x 59 inches)
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Fotohof
The Cryopreservation Unit, Cryonics Institute, Clinton Township, Michigan

This cryopreservation unit holds the bodies of Rhea and Elaine Ettinger, the mother and first wife of cryonics pioneer, Robert Ettinger. “Robert, author of The Prospect of Immortality and Man into Superman is still alive.”

The Cryopreservation Institute offers cryopreservation services for individuals and pets upon death. Cryostasis is practiced with the hope that these will ultimately be extended through future developments in science, technology, and medicine. When and if these developments occur, Institute members hope to awake to an extended life in good health, free from disease or the aging process. Cryostasis must begin immediately upon legal death. A person or pet is infused with ice-preventive substances and quickly cooled to a temperature where physical decay virtually stops. The Cryopreservation Institute charges $28,000 for cryostasis if it is planned well in advance of legal death and $35,000 on shorter notice.

© 2007 Taryn Simon / Courtesy Steidl / Gagosian

By Aaron Schuman

As a child, Taryn Simon was surrounded by photographs which were both hidden and unfamiliar. “My father took tons of pictures,” she explains, “There were Kodachrome slides everywhere, and sometimes he would get us all together and give these formal slideshows.” Whereas most American families might gather to relive a recent wedding, a birthday party, or a Disneyland vacation, the Simon’s slideshows were remarkably different. While working for the State Department, Simon’s father was stationed in the USSR during the Cold War, in Bangkok during the Vietnam War, and subsequently travelled to Afghanistan, Iran and Israel on government business, always photographing his trips extensively. In a time when most Americans were barely aware of the world beyond their country’s borders, Simon was being fed first-hand accounts from some of the most shadowy international posts in contemporary American history.

Describing herself as “a bit of a hippie kid”, Simon initially pursued environmental sciences when she began at Brown University in 1993, but quickly transferred to a degree in art semiotics, simultaneously taking photography classes at the neighboring Rhode Island School Design. By the time she had graduated, she was a freelance photographer for publications such as The New York Times, Vanity Fair and The New Yorker, traveling as far as the Caucasus to photograph injured Chechen rebels, and to Cuba to document Castro and the Palace of the Revolution.

Despite her remarkable success, Simon’s ambitions drove her to pursue work that might make a more lasting impression than conventional photojournalism – “Something that wouldn’t end up in the garbage a week later,” as she describes it. In 2001 she applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship, a grant that has generously sponsored some of the greatest photographic projects ever made, by the likes of Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, Joel Sternfeld, Mitch Epstein, and Robert Frank. “My thesis was very tight, but I never thought that I’d get it,” she explains. Much to her own surprise, she did, and immediately committed herself entirely to her own work.

The resulting portfolio, The Innocents, came about through collaboration with The Innocents Project, an organization that seeks to exonerate American inmates who have been wrongfully convicted. In the photographs, Simon took a rather frank but fascinating approach, making formal portraits of each of the “innocents” in locations that were vital to the legal cases against them – the scene of misidentification, the scene of arrest, the alibi location or the scene of the crime itself. Not only do the project’s conceptual foundations effectively question the justice system, but the images highlight the malevolent role that photography can play in the manipulation and falsification of facts. As Simon writes in the book’s forward, “Photography’s ability to blur truth and fiction is one of its most compelling qualities. But when misused as part of a prosecutor’s arsenal, this ambiguity can have severe, even lethal consequences… [P]hotography’s ambiguity, beautiful in one context, can be devastating in another.”

Simon’s most recent publication, An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar, is an incredibly diverse and astounding tome, and so far is the twenty-first century’s finest response to a longstanding tradition within American photography. Robert Frank describes this tradition in his own Guggenheim application as, “the making of a broad, voluminous picture record of things American, past and present.” Included in Frank’s 1954 pitch for what eventually became The Americans is a catalogue of his potential subject-matter: “a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none… advertising, neon lights, the faces of the leaders and the faces of the followers, gas tanks and post offices and backyards.” Simon’s American Index presents a more obscure collection of curiosities, but just as accurately reflects the United States at a very particular point in its history: a nuclear waste storage facility, a “corpse farm,” a serpent handler, Mexicans detained by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, a cryopreservation unit, a hibernating bear, an inbred white tiger, stacks of sexual assault kits awaiting DNA analysis, a Braille edition of Playboy, and so on.

Whereas earlier photographers sought to define America through that which was common – “elevating the casual, the everyday and the literal into specific, permanent symbols,” as Lincoln Kirstein described it in his introduction to Walker Evans’s American Photographs – Simon chose to symbolize the current incarnation of the country precisely through that which is official, exceptional, hidden and often freakishly extraordinary. “It’s my response to a moment when America is looking to understand things outside of its borders. I wanted to do the same thing but within American borders. But the material is also referred to as ‘unfamiliar’ because I can’t stand photography that pretends to understand its subject. I always try to create this distance whereby the viewer can see that, like them, I’m not in the know; I’m at a distance too.”

Like the medium of photography itself, there’s something remarkably seductive about the promise of transparency offered by Simon’s Index. But such superficial notions of clarity are quickly compromised once one realises that, despite having vicariously been granted access to previously alien environs, one still knows little more than before: “In each photograph there is good and evil, and that reflects the time we’re in right now. There are those polar forces at play, and it’s just so confusing,” she explains.

“Whenever you look behind the curtain, you realise that what you’ve come to rely on is actually crumbling and moldy. That’s reality, but seeing it isn’t going to cure anything. It’s only going to create further confusion of the mould.” Again, describing Walker Evans’s American Photographs in 1938, Lincoln Kirstein poetically proclaimed, “Here are the records of the age before an imminent collapse. [These] pictures exist to testify to the symptoms of waste and selfishness that caused the ruin, and to salvage whatever was splendiferous for the future reference of the survivors.” Now that certainly does seem familiar. L

White Tiger (Kenny), Selective Intbreeding Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation, Eureka Springs, Arkansas

In the United States, all living white tigers are the result of selective inbreeding to artificially create the genetic conditions that lead to white fur, ice-blue eyes and a pink nose. Kenny was born to a breeder in Bentonville, Arkansas on February 3, 1999. As a result of inbreeding, Kenny is mentally retarded and has significant physical limitations. Due to his deep-set nose, he has difficulty breathing and closing his jaw, his teeth are severely malformed and he limps from abnormal bone structure in his forearms. The three other tigers in Kenny’s litter are not considered to be quality white tigers as they are yellow-coated, cross-eyed, and knock-kneed.

© 2007 Taryn Simon / Courtesy Steidl / Gagosian
Eerie and brooding, the new Woodpecker series by Jeff Bark stretches the definition of romanticism to reference both the emotive paintings of centuries past, and the modern struggle with post-industrial malaise. Situated in a teenage wasteland that hovers between nature and urban decay, Bark’s listless figures partake in skinny-dipping, huffing, and smoking marijuana. Every element in the composition is carefully constructed to create the illusion of realism, fused with painterly timelessness. The moonlit “swamp” filled with abandoned mattresses and other debris took over a month to construct in Bark’s studio. His images have been compared to those of Caravaggio and mythical depictions of Leda and the Swan. Bark’s artistic concerns, however, center on the emotions we experience today – longing, attraction and disgust. What are the boundaries between eroticism and despair?

Woodpecker by Jeff Bark
“I’ve always been very sensitive to light, even in my house... It’s all about how the light makes you feel. In my studio the light is very sexy, calming – it’s warm from all the tungsten lights, and very comforting. In the brightness you can’t see around you, so you feel alone, except for me yelling at you saying ‘move your finger!’”

“More than trying to emulate a painting I wanted to create a kind of light I had never seen before. In my photographs you can see muscles under the skin. The light seems to come from the figures instead of bouncing off. I worked so hard at it... Photography is supposed to be all about light anyway – carving it out and being in control of it. That’s why I shoot in the studio... I create nighttime by blacking out all the windows... There are certain things in life that are constant sources of fascination – light is one of them.”

Interview with Miranda Lash, January 9, 2008
The fourteen photographers featured in the multi-screened, multimedia presentation Mined in China, on view at Houston Center for Photography during FOTOFEST2008, have ranged all over their country to provide a portal into an aspect of China that has been fundamental to its dynamic economic development and will remain crucial in its future, namely, coal mining. The images follow China’s evolutionary course from the 1950s – when, flushed with revolutionary zeal, miners were idealized as “model workers” and proletarian heroes in Mao’s revolution – to the present, when they have largely faded from view to become bit characters in the drama of their nation’s industrialization.

This is just the back story. My interest in coal came about as something of an accident. While visiting China some months ago, I found myself gazing out on Beijing’s impressive skyline and suddenly realizing that I had seen neither the sun nor the sky in over a week. At first, I wondered if this were caused by inclement weather. The reality, however, was that the penumbra of smog hanging so persistently over so many Chinese cities is man-made, caused by emissions from coaled-fired factories and power plants and the rapidly growing number of vehicles.

Magnum photographer Susan Meiselas and I have long wanted to work on a collaborative project together. We set out to document the story of coal as seen through the eyes of Chinese documentary photographers. We hope that these photographs will help open a window on a new world.

by Orville Schell

One tends to assume that escape from the city will bring relief. So one morning I set off in a van with my Chinese-born wife, our two sons, and a close friend, on a vacation expedition across North China’s Shanxi Province to visit some Buddhist temples, grottoes and an ancient walled town.

Even though I knew that Shanxi was coal country, we were unprepared for what we found. I had forgotten that some 70% of China’s energy comes from burning coal. China now uses more coal each year than the U.S., the E.U., and Japan combined – the annual increase in production each year has been over 15%, and a new coal-fired power plant goes on line somewhere in China every 5-7 days.

Even after we gained the countryside beyond the Great Wall, the sun and sky remained obscured. In fact, during the whole thousand-mile trip, they never became visible, leaving the Shanxi landscape looking as if it had been photographed without focus in black and white. The roads were an endless crawl of large, battered and overloaded coal trucks, grinding sluggishly up hills and then hurtling down into the valleys. The roadsides were relieved by occlusions of tin shacks and one-story brick lean to-like structures occupied by greasy truck mechanics and tire repair shops, sooty outdoor restaurants, and truck stops where drivers could get a quick and inexpensive meal, a short nap and maybe a local woman. Their earthen parking areas were drenched in waste motor oil, hydraulic fluid, solvents and God knows what.

The towns were filled with coal, as I had expected, but the evidence was overwhelming. The power lines were visibly sagging under the weight of coal trucks. The towers were crumbling under the weight of coal deposits. The buildings were covered with soot from smoke stacks. The streets were wide enough to accommodate two trucks. The trees were covered with yellow dust. The air was filled with yellow smoke (SO2) gushing out of furnaces with an outdated coking technique.

Geng YunSheng

Wumeng miners, Zhenxiong, Yunnan, December 2002

They’re at the age of receiving education, but they have to work here because of poverty.

Wang MianLi

Transportation, Shandong, n.d.

Transportation Railway in Yanzhou

Coal Mine Cooperation

above:

Niu Quo Zheng

Smoke No.038, Henan, December 2006

Yellow smoke (SO2) gushes out of furnaces with an outdated coking technique.

abov e, right

Wang Dajiang / China Features

Song Chunde, Shanxi, March 2007

When Song Chunde died on August 22nd, 1990, he was only 35 years old, and what he left behind were his wife with two children. The biggest wish for their children then, was to have dinner with their mother Li Yanqin, who had to support the whole family all by herself.

right:

Dong Lin

Datong, Shanxi, May 2007

left:

Ni Quo Zheng

Smoke No.038, Henan, December 2006

Yellow smoke (SO2) gushes out of furnaces with an outdated coking technique.
what other toxic petroleum byproducts. Living trees were few, but everywhere were wrecked vehicles, piles of fly ash and rubble, and – of course – mountains of coal from the thousands of state-owned and privately-run mines, many of them primitive, dangerous, illegal, and run with some of the most appalling work conditions in the world today. And then, farther back from the roads, were the voracious industrial users of coal: huge power plants belching clouds of bituminous, brown smoke into the exhausted air; and cement factories with great plumes of white dust billowing up from the piles of fly ash from the brick kilns like snow from the face of Mt. Everest.

As we drove toward Taiyuan and Datong, two of the most polluted cities in the world (China has sixteen of the world’s top twenty contenders for this dubious honor, and four of the top ten are located in Shanxi Province), we crossed rivers – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, riverbeds – because, with rare exception, they were all bone-dry. North China has admittedly been experiencing a severe drought these past few years, but the destruction of China’s rivers is not caused by drought alone. Uncontrolled construction of dams and overuse by riparian water for irrigation and industry have dried up hundreds of rivers in North China, or left them trickling with little more than industrial effluent and human sewage.

If one travels to China by plane, it is easy to assume that one has perhaps just arrived on a bad day and to dismiss despoiled land as something of an exception to the rule. But, after one has driven hundreds of miles from city to city, it becomes inescapably clear that China is, largely because of coal, on the precipice of an environmental disaster the likes of which our world is unaccustomed.

The enormous cost that China pays for its reliance on coal is not reflected in its extraordinary 10-11% annual growth rate that has pulled tens of millions out of poverty and turned China into one of the world’s most impressive economic powerhouses. It is, however, abundantly clear for anyone who cares to take notice of the country’s air, polluted with sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and mercury emissions that cause an estimated half a million premature deaths each year. “The conflict between environment and development is becoming ever more prominent,” a report from the State Council (China’s Cabinet) recently warned. “The relative shortage of resources, fragile ecology, and insufficient environmental capacity are becoming critical problems hindering China’s development.”

Nowhere is this contradiction more evident than in coal country. As Zhu Guangyao, Deputy Chief of the State Environmental protection Administration recently put it, China’s environmental situation is worsening and “allows for no optimism.”

Uncontrolled construction of dams and overuse by riparian water for irrigation and industry have dried up hundreds of rivers in North China, or left them trickling with little more than industrial effluent and human sewage.

Mined in China is on view at HCP from March 8 – April 20, 2008.
by Clare Elliott

William Christenberry distinguishes himself among artists, and perhaps most particularly among photographers, by simultaneously pursuing several media: photography, painting, drawing, and sculpture. Christenberry’s Washington D.C. studio, where the various permutations of his art practice exist undifferentiated by media, provides an incomparable position from which to gain a greater understanding of his work.

Christenberry’s use of the found object, a formal strategy fundamental to 20th century art and not fully explored thus far in his career, is well-illustrated by his studio. A large collection of found objects extends to the shelves and surfaces of the studio and also into his home. The most apparent and remarkable aspect is a wall entirely occupied by a carefully arranged collection of found signs.

“Artists are always seeing things,” he has said – where? “Obviously your eyes are always open, but you’re always sort of looking at natural things, found objects, and associating them in one way or another with what you do. You are perceiving. I’m always looking around. I think most visual artists are visual animals in a way. We are avaricious. The eye must be avaricious. Everything can be subject matter. Anything can be subject matter.”

In the early 1960s, Christenberry started incorporating found objects – particularly metal advertising – signs into his sculpture and his painting. At the same time, he began taking his photography of negatives and proof sheets as well as boxes of prints in various sizes. From time to time he will revisit old proof sheets finding compelling images he had previously overlooked.

After Christenberry moved away from Alabama in the early 1960s, he began to form the content work around his memories of the region, and in turn the essence of memory itself. As Walter Benjamin wrote, “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories… the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past… are conspicuously present…”

Christenberry’s photographic practice takes place nearly entirely offsite. His photographs are taken exclusively in the rural south, mostly in an area of Alabama where his family lived, and occasionally in neighboring counties in Tennessee. He has built an iconography of the region’s landmarks, and also of the changes, subtle and dramatic, they have undergone.

Although familiar with Duchamp’s breakthrough presentation of found material as art, Christenberry uses the object trouvé in a manner that has little to do with Duchamp’s iconic Dadaist gesture. Rather, like all of his art, the found objects constitute another approach taken by Christenberry to make sense of, or perhaps only to make concrete, his formless recollections.

A distinctive elongated triangular shape, reminiscent of Klansmen’s robes, surfaces throughout Christenberry’s work, a subtle reference to his fascination with the KKK. But noticeably absent from the studio is Christenberry’s controversial installation The Klan Room (1962-present), a work that now includes over 300 discrete pieces, including Klan dolls (both home-made and GI Joes in sewn Klan costumes), photographs, found and constructed objects, and Ku Klux Klan ephemera. The beginning of this project in the early 1960s coincides precisely with his twin discoveries of sculpture and photographs. As he does in all his work, in The Klan Room Christenberry explores his roots in the South, in this case unflinchingly examining what the artist calls its “strange and secret brutality.”

This rarely displayed environment is housed off-site for good reason. In a 1979 theft, several of the dolls and other Klan memorabilia were carefully removed from the studio. To this day, Christenberry does not know whether the intruder was someone hostile to the artwork, or protective of the Klan. In either case, The Klan Room now warrants some distance between it and the artist and his family.

In less deft hands, the range of media employed by Christenberry may generate nothing more than distraction. Yet the very strength of Christenberry’s work lies in its heterogeneity. Despite its variety, Christenberry’s oeuvre exists as a remarkably focused and evocative whole.

Vivid Vernacular: Christenberry, Eggleston, & Evans is on view at the Menil Collection from January 11-April 20, 2008.


All images © 2008 Clare Elliott. Photographed with permission.
The number 7 line has a unique place in the development of New York City. Historically, it helped develop a borough, and now it helps define our image of diversity. The Interborough Rapid Transit system began transporting people under the East River to Queens in 1915, though the extension to Corona took another two years. The final stops in Flushing were finished in 1928 and what we now call the 7 train was complete. Many people have noted that the line has been intimately connected with New York’s immigrants from the very beginning. Most of the workers who built the line were immigrants, and many of the people who settled in Queens from the time of the construction of the line were new Americans seeking a more affordable alternative to Manhattan.1 In the early and twentieth mid-century, the immigrants were Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Irish. Late in the century, particularly after U.S. immigration laws changed in the mid-1960’s they were joined by a major influx of East and South Asians as well as Latinos. According to New York City Planning’s “Newest New Yorkers” report, the population of Queens included 46.1% immigrants as of the last comprehensive count in the 2000 census.

In a 1999 Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker famously derided the 7 line. He said that he would retire rather than come and pitch for the New York Mets because he would have to ride the #7 to Shea Stadium. His homophobic, anti-immigrant rant was ignorant in many ways. On a factual basis, Rocker was wrong to depict the line as menacing. For the most part it is a well-traveled commuter train for people who live in Queens and work in Manhattan. But Rocker’s ignorance was more profound. His words were spoken by a person who is simply not used to interacting in a hyper-diverse set of neighbors. Ironically, in a cascade of unintended consequences, Rocker’s words could hardly have been better for the reputation of the 7 line. I was riding the train on a daily basis in 1999 just after his famous rant made it from the sports page to the mainstream news. It seemed that there was a television crew at every stop for a couple of weeks after the article came out, interviewing the passengers and community residents.

From that time forward, the 7 train became a symbol for striving multicultural Queens. A year later, in 2000, the line was proclaimed a “National Millennium Trail” by the federal government, one of only 16 in the country. The 7 had become a celebrated national symbol, now dubbed the “International Express.”

In 1999 the year Rocker derided the 7, like millions of new Americans before him, Taiwan-born Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao settled in Jackson Heights, about mid-way into Queens. He began commuting to Manhattan on the 7 line to complete his graduate studies and earn a living. Five years later, he began an ambitious project to document life along the subway line he knew so well, and Habitat 7 was born. But Liao’s photographic series captures the energy of the place with a somewhat distanced view. While he depicts the crowds in some of his photographs, he does not linger on the single protagonist. Rather he asks us to look into the photograph, to see people in the context of the street rather than the street as a backdrop for the individual. The stories are in the details. Because Liao uses an 8” x 10” camera, the detail is so sharp that even shots from a distance capture the rich human detail of the environment.

I am often struck in either driving on the highway or riding the subway through Queens how the most obviously beautiful sections of the borough are hidden from view. Outsiders are guided through areas populated by warehouses and public housing, oblivious to the fact that four or five blocks away, there are tree-lined streets with perfectly manicured lawns. In general, Liao’s photographs are richly textured depictions of settings that are not physically beautiful in a traditional sense. Liao finds rugged beauty in the engineering of the elevated subway, social beauty in the people who frequent the line, and creates traditional aesthetic beauty in his craft as a photographer.

For many viewers Liao’s series will be an unfamiliar ride. But for those of us who have the chance to spend time in Queens, the scenes are familiar. Lacking a single center, a defining downtown, we see the 7 as the spine of Queens. In looking at the series I was struck with the question of whether the photographs would be more interesting for a person who never rides the 7 or one who is familiar with the route. I concluded that the insiders and outsiders simply see the photographs differently. As a longtime rider, I took past the architectural banality and cultural exoticism. Each photograph in the series exhibits a remarkable attention to detail.
A sweet public service announcement on WNYC radio earlier this year quoted two young women describing their move to Astoria, Queens. Their enthusiasm for their neighborhood was infectious, and they ended by saying together in unison, “Queens, the Borough of Dreams.” As a Queens enthusiast, I loved the spot because it summed up so much about the place so concisely. Indeed it is not a paradise, but there is a tremendous amount of hope on its streets. In his book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell described recent research into the perceptions of race. While John Rocker’s racism is more overt than most people’s Gladwell discusses how the vast majority of us harbor prejudices that we do not recognize on a conscious level. In fact Gladwell discusses how certain psychological tests have consistently revealed to him his own internalized racism against African Americans – ironic, of course because he is half Black. But, Gladwell argues, our impressions of people are generated by our environment, and the best way to fight our subconscious racism is to change our experiences: “It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and the best of their culture.”

At some level, I feel that the power of art can have the same sort of effect. By looking closely at Liao’s photographs, by vicariously experiencing the feel of the 7 line, one can sense the everyday life of this unique ribbon of life through the city. It is through the combination of the everydayness of the scenes with the detail and beauty of the photographs that Liao draws us into this rich and saturated environment.

Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao: *Habitat 7* is on view at HCP from March 8 – April 20, 2008. Extracts from the article “Queens: The Borough of Dreams” is published with permission from Nazraeli Press/Tom Finkelpearl. All rights reserved. For a fuller version, see Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao: *Habitat 7* (Portland: Nazraeli Press, 2007).

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1. The International Express Around The World
On The 7 Train: The Queens Tribune web site: www.queenstribune.com/anniversary2002/internationalexpress.htm

Photography in Miami by Titus O’Brien

SPRING 08

For one brief moment in December, Miami becomes the undisputed center of the art universe. It’s a recent phenomena (begun in 2002 as the sister art event to Art Basel, Switzerland), and only time will tell how long this will remain the case. For now, Art Basel Miami Beach is the winter art sales sun; two dozen other fairs, large and small, are orbiting planetary satellites, hoping to thrive by absorbing some of the radiant market heat.

Move over Bill Viola – Mariana Vassileva uses Vermeer’s Milkmaid as inspiration for her own image: a looped digital video of a pale woman, dressed in white, in a white room, pouring milk, forever. Margret Eicher creates images digitally and has them stitched into large, wall-hanging tapestries. This kind of Trump-ian, overwrought baroque-oco is everywhere now, poetically appropriate for our hyper-gilded age, where the super-rich are the primary engines fueling the art market boom. Just don’t ask where the cash is coming from (hint – from the same places it always has: guns, gems, and steel). AES+F’s kids have a lot of company out there. Expressionless youths in truble comprise a sizable segment of the photographic subject population. Young, lost women in particular are everywhere, looking wanly vacant despite threatening environs. Loretta Lux may have been one of the first to create sweet, fairy tale images of dazed-eyed children as contemporary art, but this too has become a constant trope. They are joined on the walls by lots of scaled-up dolls and toys, humorously, eerily, and poignantly standing in for human counterparts. Harrowing details of our overcrowded planet are also common. Ansel Adams would have a very hard time these days. Rather than the once-standard utopian Modernist themes, whether of natural or urban existence, you’re more likely to see seas of tenements, details of thousand story high-rises, toxic dump sites, and infinite urban sprawl, depicted so seductively in their technique that rather than simply lament the horror of a sci-fi dystopian present, one almost comes to admire our insect-like industriousness.

Digital media (which is photography now to all but a few craft- y Luddite stalwarts) has this advantage. Our mediated world, our very consciousness, is shaped by bits and bytes, and the world’s transformation is only accelerating. It can be exciting to see this world reflected back to us with media emanating from and helping to create these new landscapes – intelligently informed by art of the past, but not enslaved to it. If much of it seems overly fashion- conscious or too “of the moment,” out of the miasma there are some more serious thinkers whose works will endure, and maybe even occasionally indicate methods of soul-survival in this dawning age of nine billion people, mass species extinction, and catastrophic climate change. What else is art for? Status symbols on a sinking ship? In Miami, from all appearances, most votes would likely be cast for the latter.

With SPOT in mind, I kept a particular eye out for photo trends. The mind naturally attempts to make order of the chaos, and seeing thousands of artworks per hour is nothing short of mind-boggling. Nevertheless, my mantra becoming “Don’t panic!”, patterns revealed themselves, with archetypes and attitudes coalescing into recognizable shapes. Chief among them was photography’s dominance/prominence at all the various fairs. I began my three-day art slog at the two large fairs devoted solely to photography and digital media: Photo Miami and AIPAD (the Association of International Photography Art Dealers). I was skeptical that one fair devoted solely to photographs could hold my attention, much less two next door to one another, but Photo Miami was riveting. The overall impression was spacious despite the density, slickness, and utterly contemporary nature of the event. Digital techniques were prevalent, with lots of plasma screens and bright, large format prints and light boxes on all sides. By contrast, AIPAD seemed clutstered and stodgy – many booths hung floor to ceiling, with actual bins of black and white prints on folding tables to be flipped through for cash-and-carry purchases. It was as if the exhibitors had agreed to be tacky and backward, making sure there was just way too much stuff.

If painting has been fixated the last few years on particular tropes and techniques – deer, skulls, drawing, watermedia, and piles of detritus, to list a few – general photographic themes became apparent through the various fairs. A small curated exhibition at the entrance to Photo Miami pointed to a persistent one. Called “The Last Painting Show,” curator Paco Baragan selected photo and video works from exhibitors that reference painting’s history and tactics. It was hard to turn around at any of the fairs without bumping into a photograph or video that overtly nodded to new media’s more storied forebear, often to greater effect than by contemporary painters themselves. It’s easy to forget that in the age of Caravaggio or Rubens, painters were technical revolutionaries as much as aesthetic ones, continually appropriating imagery and themes from classical predecessors while pushing the limits of their media. In the same way, artists today are using (and in the process humanizing) cutting-edge technology to contemplate and re-contextualize events in our mind, I kept a particular eye out for photo trends.
Book Review by Rachel Hopper

Josephine Meckseper has an acuity for juxtapositions of fashion and politics, passion and style. Her photographs, films, installations, and assemblages remix familiar modes of presentation—merchandising, photojournalism, and political propaganda—in puzzling combinations that create a visually lush, subtly provocative experience. The Kunstmuseum Stuttgart's catalog, which accompanied Meckseper's first major solo exhibition, provides a critical introduction to the conceptual artist's practice. The book includes an interview with the artist by exhibition curator Simone Schimpf, and essays by Okwui Enwezor and Christian Höller. Although articles have appeared about Meckseper in Artforum, Frieze, and the New York Times, this catalog is the first publication to track the artist's development over recent decades and to allow Meckseper to discuss her own art in depth.

The texts offer many insights into Meckseper's work, including her perspective as a modern-day Marxist. Although the artist states, “the basic foundation of my work is a critique of capitalism,” her leftist leanings are tempered by a healthy skepticism toward rhetoric and hegemony (27). The book opens with her series of photographs, “The Stuttgart Cycle” (2004). The pictures record mundane scenes from Stuttgart’s streets: shoes for sale, posters of models in a hair salon, a placard announcing a demonstration for “solidarity and class struggle,” graffiti supporting the Red Army Faction, a view through barbed wire of the Stammheim prison, and the main desk of Christian Democratic Union party headquarters. References to left wing politics in the same series as photographs of commercial displays are not as disjunctive as you might expect. Her matter-of-fact presentation of opposing slogans, signs, and signifiers causes each to blend into the next, until they start to feel the same – loaded and lonely.

In their essays, Enwezor and Höller contextualize Meckseper amidst other artists and theorists. Enwezor mentions others who have used “negation” as a fundamental concept in their work – Andy Warhol, David Hammons, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer (48). Like these artists, Meckseper reasserts “the radical potential of artistic forms in the commodified field of political cynicism.” Höller builds on Enwezor’s arguments emphasizing the feeling of “escalation” in her work “for while appearing to surrender peacefully to the triumph of capitalism, they are nevertheless charged with a potential for tension which disturbs this same deceptive peace.” (124)

In her interview Meckseper explains, “Instead of aestheticizing political issues and problems, what I try to do is challenge ingrained perspectives, for instance, habits of seeing in leafing through a newspaper in which horror stories from Iraq appear side by side with underwear advertisements” (27). This sensitivity to the cacophony of mixed messages in print media may relate to Meckseper’s work as a photo editor for Der Spiegel in the 1990s and to her time spent earning her MFA at the California Institute of the Arts from 1990 to 1992. In the midst of the Rodney King riots, she snapped pictures of the chaos. She later made a film that interspersed these still images with footage of a lecture by Félix Guattari. The book also offers rare glimpses of the magazine Meckseper published in the early 1990s, FAT, a quirky blend of artist inserts with sensational tabloidesque pictures and stories. With her conceptual contrasts and low-end aesthetics, she seems visually attuned to an underlying static: the white noise of commercialism and the politics that purport to stand apart from it. In this context, the fact that the Stuttgart exhibition was sponsored by Hugo Boss, the very same company whose underwear advertisements appear in Meckseper’s displays, is both ironic and fitting.

Although Meckseper is skilled at evoking the numbing and confusing struggles that surround us, what is most moving about her art are those moments that cut through the grey area, from references to the very real destruction of war, to the exposed look in the eyes of her models. These are the punctum that draw us in, remind us of what’s at stake, and reveal the wounds inflicted by power and greed.
Nan Goldin: Stories Retold

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

by Bill Davenport

Nan Goldin: Stories Retold, curated by Alison de Lima Greene, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston adds a new layer to work already about memory. Her breakthrough photographs from the late 1970’s and 80’s are reconstituted in large grids and as projected video. Even the Ballad of Sexual Dependency, her signature slide show, has been re-edited.

Nan Goldin has made a career of documenting her troubled life and her troubled friends for the horrified enjoyment of us regular folk, escaping simple voyeurism by making herself the subject. Other people she photographed were chosen for their close relationship to her. “I’m not crashing,” she once said, “this is my party.” Her work puts us on edge by showing us a festival of freaks and challenging us not to gawk.

Throughout the show, there’s a disappointing feeling that she’s mashing and remixing old work to squeeze new life out of past glory. In X-Rated Grid, individual photographs are dated 1976-1999, while the work as a whole is dated 2000. Other pieces have similar, complex dates that make it hard to discern how Goldin’s viewpoint has changed over a thirty-year span. Tokyo Spring Fever Grid is a sprawling travelogue of the Tokyo sex industry featuring Nobuyoshi Araki as jolly, gray-mustachioed tour guide. More distant, and more exploitative, it’s not Goldin’s party. And the grids format doesn’t have the unfolding impetus of a slide show or even a book. Stories re-packaged, but not re-imagined.

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency broke boundaries in the mid-eighties and still looks great. With snapshot subjects and bad lighting and lurid color, they captured moments in the best Cartier-Bresson tradition, but the moments were of such fragmentary significance that most only became meaningful in context, presented by the hundreds in slide shows. The most often reproduced image, Nan and Brian in Bed, is atypically complete, making for an excellent book cover, but more akin to Cindy Sherman’s fleshy role-playing than Goldin’s reality TV.

For there is a layer of self-conscious theater in Goldin’s pictures. Goldin and her subject are larger-than-life characters, reading Baudelaire, reclining into a feather boa, draping themselves in eccentric party outfits and exaggerated makeup. Interesting friends and attractive lovers give heroin addiction a Hollywood glamour. Goldin’s strength is in her empathic ability to show their desperate couplings and postures as simply more raw-edged versions of the struggles for love and identity we all experience.

The new counterpart to Goldin’s seminal Ballad of Sexual Dependency is Sisters, Saints, and Sibyls, 2004, a 3-screen DVD projection. It’s a 39-minute monologue. The first segment tells the story of Santa Barbara, illustrated with stills from medieval manuscripts. Goldin was locked her in a tower to preserve her virginity, then beheaded by her father. The second segment is a maudlin account of the troubled life and eventual death by suicide of Goldin’s older sister, Barbara. Goldin belabors the parallel between the two, dedicating the piece to “women who have been persecuted for their rebelliousness.” and underlining her feelings about her parents’ treatment of her sister with the whispered, repetitive chant “motherfuckers, motherfuckers…”

Dry images accompany the story: empty hallways, empty railroad tracks, and dreary institutional buildings that Goldin revisits like picking at old scars, akin to the self-inflicted cigarette burns Goldin flaunts with something disturbingly like pride in the last segment of the piece – still hair raising after all these years.

This exhibition is on view at MFAH from November 17, 2007 through March 30, 2008.
Books
