

A photograph of a room on fire. In the foreground, a wooden chair has several items of clothing hanging from its back: a plaid shirt, a white t-shirt, and a pair of blue jeans with red stitching. To the left, a white towel is draped over the chair's seat. In the background, a large fire is burning, with bright orange flames and thick yellow smoke filling the room. A person is visible in the distance, near the fire. The overall scene is one of chaos and destruction.

spot

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

SPRING 2008

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Untitled 1972-1973 photcollage on acrylic background with paint drops 10 1/2 x 9 5/8 inches
 Image © Estate of Jay DeFeo/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Building with False Brick Siding, Warsaw, Alabama 1991 archival pigment print 20 x 24 inches Edition of 25

William Christenberry

February 23 - April 5, 2008

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2008
FEST
CHINA

TRANSFORMATIONS

THE TWELFTH
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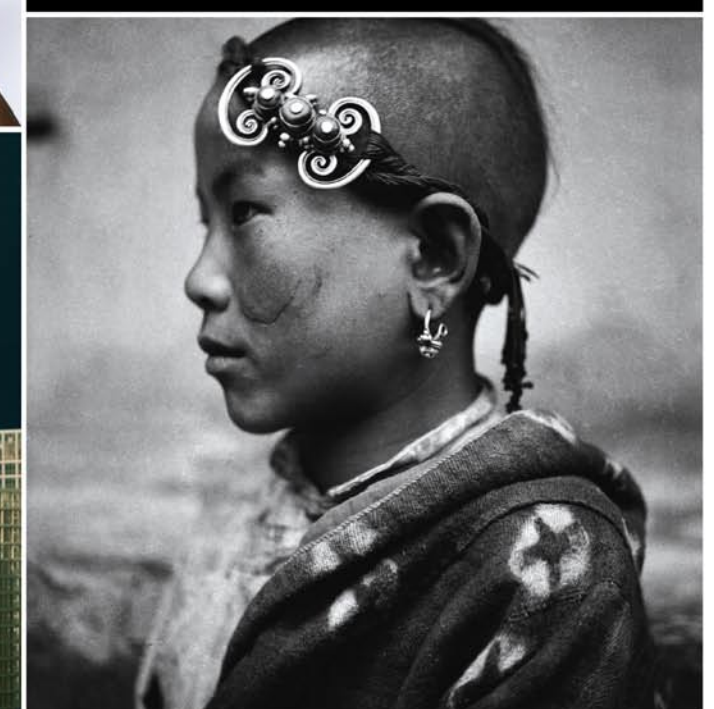
PHOTOGRAPHY
FROM CHINA,
1934-2008

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

PHOTOGRAPHS
 TOP
 WU JIALIN
 LEFT TOP
 XING DANWEN
 LEFT BOTTOM
 WU GAOJUAN
 RIGHT BOTTOM
 ZHUANG XUEBEN



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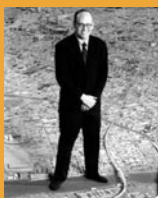
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Contributors

Jeff Bark is a photographer living and working in New York City. He is represented by Michael Hoppen Contemporary in London.

David Crossley is a founder and former president of HCP. He was the first editor of *SPOT*, and chairs the HCP Publications Committee.

Bill Davenport is a sculptor who lives in Houston. He has written nearly 100,000 words about art in Texas since 1990.

Clare Elliott is an assistant curator for The Menil Collection. She recently organized the exhibition *Vivid Vernacular: William Christenberry, William Eggleston, and Walker Evans*.

Tom Finkelpearl is the Executive Director of the Queens Museum of Art. He was formerly the Program Director of PS 1 Contemporary Art Center and the Director of New York City's Percent for Art Program.

Rachel Hooper is the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Curatorial Fellow at Blaffer Gallery, the art museum of the University of Houston.

Miranda Lash is the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Her recent writings are published in *Frida Kahlo: 1907-2007*, *Homenaje Nacional*, and *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art*.

Titus O'Brien received his MFA from Yale University and is an artist, writer, and adjunct professor of visual art at UT Arlington.

Orville Schell is a former Dean at the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and the current Arthur Ross Director of the Asia Society Center on U.S.-China Relations. He is the author of nine books on China, most recently *Virtual Tibet*, *The China Reader: The Reform Years*, and *Mandate of Heaven*.

Aaron Schuman is an American photographer, editor, lecturer and critic, currently based in the UK. He is the founder, director, and editor of the online photography journal *Seesaw Magazine*.

Madeline Yale is the Executive Director and Curator at Houston Center for Photography.



Spring 2008
Volume XXVI No.1

Guest Editor
Miranda Lash

Managing Editor
Miye Bromberg

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David Crossley, *Chair*
Madeline Yale, *Chief Editorial Advisor*
Peter Brown
Jeff DeBevec
Patricia Eifel
Paul Hester
David Jacobs
Miranda Lash
Mary Magsamen
Toby Kamps
Ebony Porter
Paul Zeigler

Design
Antonio Manega, Gazer Design

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HCP's mission is to increase society's understanding and appreciation of photography and its evolving role in contemporary culture. HCP strives to encourage artists, build audiences, stimulate dialogue, and promote inquiry about photography and related media through education, exhibitions, publications, fellowship programs, and community collaboration.

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Houston Center for Photography
1441 West Alabama, Houston, Texas 77006
Telephone 713.529.4755, Fax 713.529.9248
info@hcponline.org, www.hcponline.org

Executive Director and Curator
Madeline Yale

Executive Assistant
Leigh Boone

Education Coordinator
Rachel Hewlett

Program Coordinator
Ebony Porter

Finance Administrator
Sean Yarbrough

Weekend Gallery Manager & SPOT ad sales
Paul Elhoff

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Glue Sniffing Kids, 2007.
Chromogenic print.
From the series *Fire Scene*.
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In this Issue

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 new. *SPOT*'s founding editor, David Crossley, writes on the origins of HCP, while Madeline Yale, 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 write on Taryn Simon's national photographic project, and Clare Elliott investigate 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 *Mined 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 Miye Bromberg, *SPOT*'s departing managing editor. 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

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

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February

Feb 21 – March 6 Exhibition

Magnum Photos and Baume & Mercier present *Moments in Time*



Student Glass Plate Negatives
© France Scully Osterman 2008

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 8, 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 Palladium 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 2, 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 Magsamen & Stephan Hillerbrand, 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



HCP's John Cleary Library © Rachel Hewlett 2008

July

July 25, 7 - 11pm

SPIN4 Party

August

August 1 – August 31

Membership Exhibition
juried by Dr. Alison Nordström



Students at MD Anderson © Rachel Hewlett 2008

September

September 12 – October 26 Exhibitions

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



From the series *Enter the Dragon* © Mike Osborne 2008

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

SUBMISSION DEADLINE:

Friday, April 4, 2008

NOTIFICATION DATE:

May 15, 2008

EXHIBITION DATES:

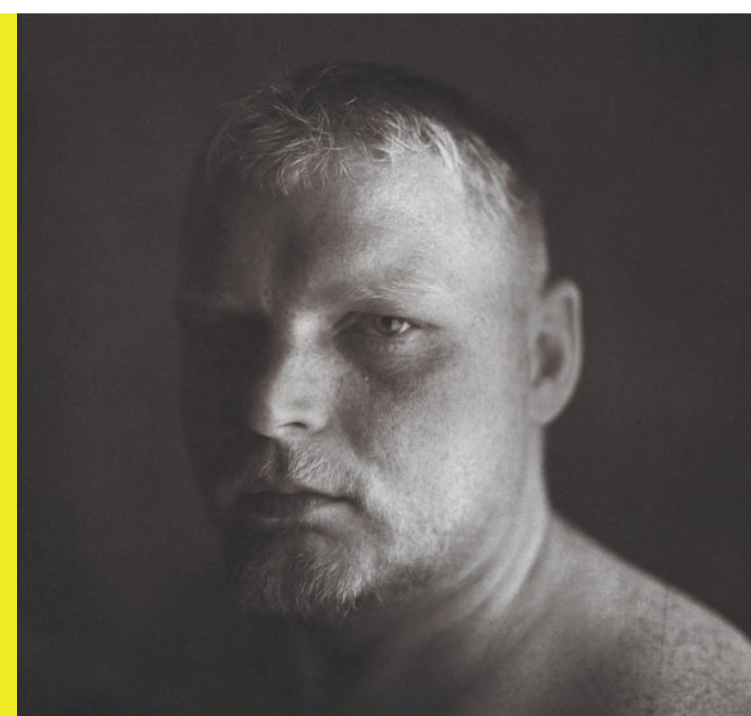
August 1 – August 31, 2008

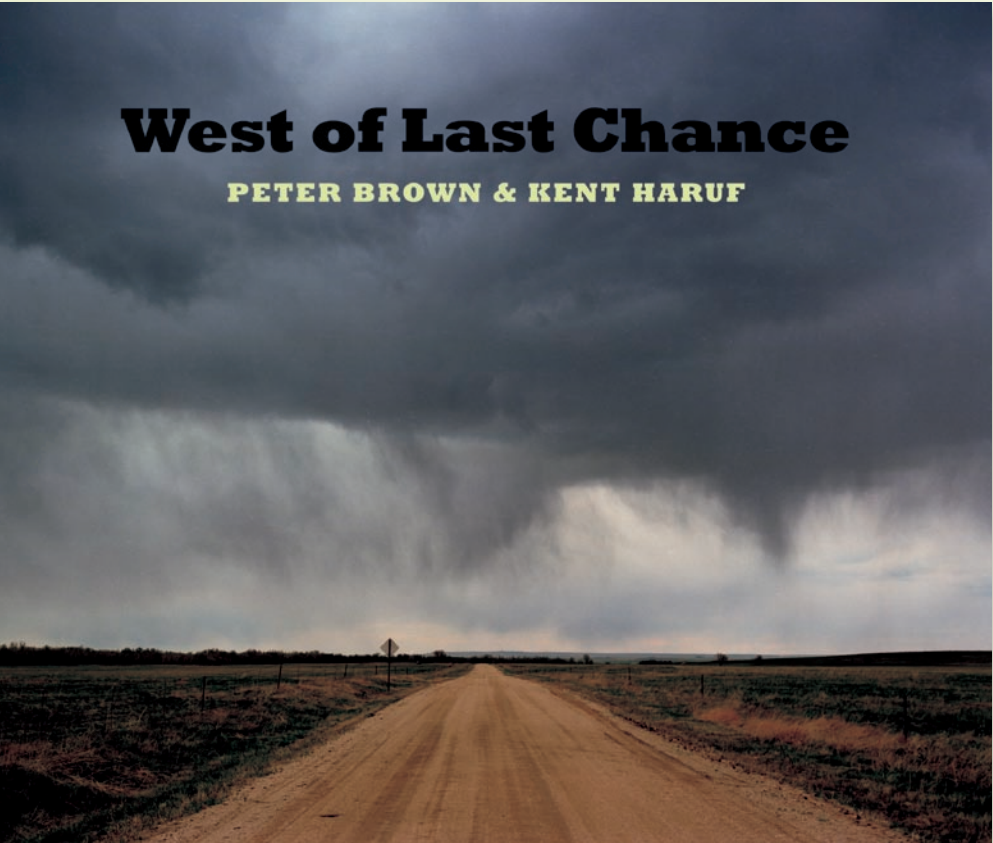
HCP's 26th Anniversary Juried Membership Exhibition

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

photo: Will Michels (Houston), *Rocky*, 2006. Salted paper print. Will Michels is an active member at HCP and exhibited in the 2007 Membership Exhibition, juried by Anne Wilkes Tucker.





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 6-8 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 Books, 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 Cohen Gallery, Los Angeles and The Highland Gallery, Marfa, Texas. He is the author of the Imogen Cunningham Award winning *Seasons of Light* and The Alfred Eisenstaedt Award winning *On the Plains*. He lives in Houston, Texas.

Kent Haruf is the author of the National Book Award Nominated *Plainsong*, the best selling *Eventide*, and the Whiting Prize winning *The Tie That Binds* and *Where You Once Belonged*. He lives in Salida Colorado.

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



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“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 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 torn geography so 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-exploration*

“If 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 alchemy. By its end, my notions of beauty, space and time were irrevocably altered.”
— *Mark Spragg, 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 clumsiness, 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 these stirrings of spirit and soul. One is moved to memorize his entries as one would stanzas 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 historic 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 foolish and naive for being hopeful about anything at all - meets its match in this unsentimental 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*



HCP’s First Membership Exhibition, © Paul Hester, 1981/2008

A Bigger Tent for Photography

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?



above: Boo Ritson, *Red Swimmer*, 2006
Archival Digital Print, 124 x 104 cm

next page: Hannah Starkey, *Untitled – September 2006*, 2006
C-print mounted on aluminum, 48 x 64 1/8 inches
Courtesy the Artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

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 Abramovi, 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 Croitoru (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 Sighecielli's *Untitled (Benevenuto di Giovanni)*, a back lit photograph of a Siennese 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 collecton 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, XIV: 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



Alexandra Croitoru
ROM, 2004
C-print
55 x 77 cm
Edition 1/5 + 2 A/P
Courtesy of 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



Taryn Simon: *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*



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 Cryonics Institute offers cryostasis (freezing) services for individuals and pets upon death. Cryostasis is practiced with the hope that lives 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 Cryonics 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 Disneyworld 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*, travelling 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 these 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 awareness 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 splendid for the future reference of the survivors.” Now that certainly does seem familiar. 

Wason, Althea, ed.
Taryn Simon: An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar.
London: Steidl, 2007

Hymenoplasty, Cosmetic Surgery, P. A. Fort Lauderdale, Florida

The patient in this photograph is 21 years old. She is of Palestinian descent and living in the United States. In order to adhere to cultural and familial expectations regarding her virginity and marriage, she underwent hymenoplasty. Without it she feared she would be rejected by her future husband and bring shame upon her family. She flew in secret to Florida where the operation was performed by Dr. Bernard Stern, a plastic surgeon she located on the internet.

The purpose of hymenoplasty is to reconstruct a ruptured hymen, the membrane which partially covers the opening of the vagina. It is an outpatient procedure which takes approximately 30 minutes and can be done under local or intravenous anesthesia. Dr. Stern charges \$3,500 for hymenoplasty. He also performs labiaplasty and vaginal rejuvenation.

© 2007 Taryn Simon / Courtesy Steidl / Gagosian



U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Contraband Room, John F. Kennedy International Airport, Queens, New York

African cane rats infested with maggots, African yams (dioscorea), Andean potatoes, Bangladeshi cucurbit plants, bush meat, cherimoya fruit, curry leaves (murraya), dried orange peels, fresh eggs, giant African snail, impala skull cap, jackfruit seeds, June plum, kola nuts, mango, okra, passion fruit, pig nose, pig mouths, pork, raw poultry (chicken), South American pig head, South American tree tomatoes, South Asian lime infected with citrus canker, sugar cane (poaceae), uncooked meats, unidentified sub tropical plant in soil.

All items in the photograph were seized from the baggage of passengers arriving in the U.S. at JFK Terminal 4 from abroad over a 48-hour period. All seized items are identified, dissected, and then either ground up or incinerated. JFK processes more international passengers than any other airport in the United States.

© 2007 Taryn Simon / Courtesy Steidl / Gagosian



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

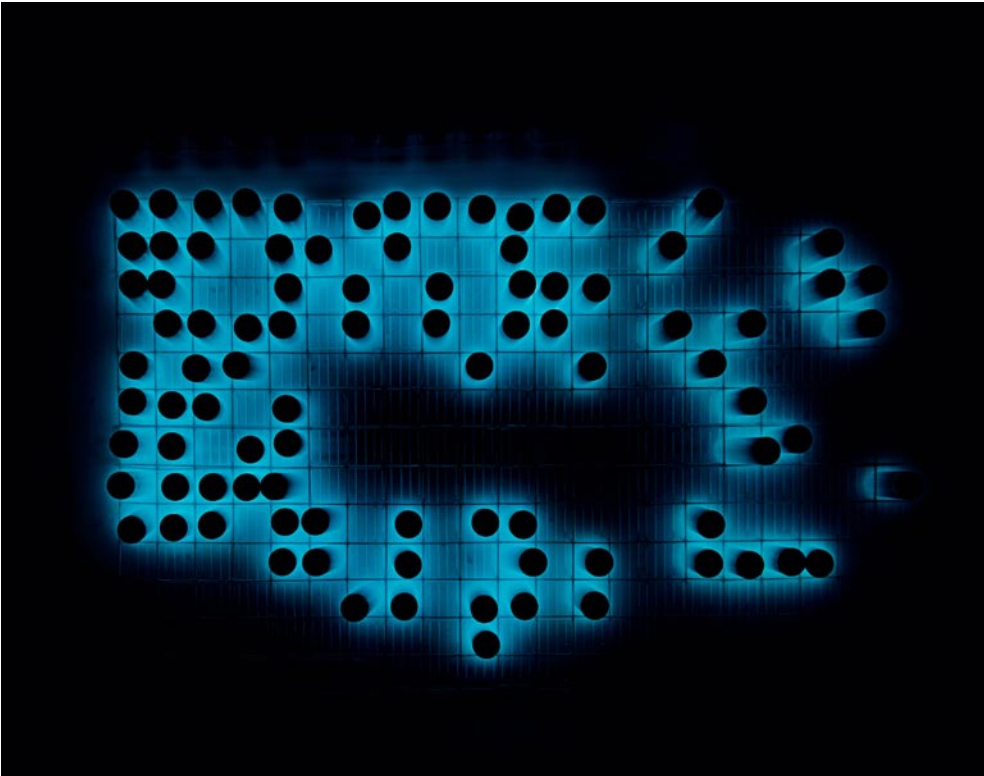
In the United States, all living white tigers are the result of selective inbreeding to artificially create the genetic conditions that lead to white fur, ice-blue eyes and a pink nose. Kenny was born to a breeder in Bentonville, Arkansas on February 3, 1999. As a result of inbreeding, Kenny is mentally 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.

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Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility Cherenkov Radiation Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy Southeastern Washington State

Submerged in a pool of water at Hanford Site are 1,936 stainless-steel nuclear-waste capsules containing cesium and strontium. Combined, they contain over 120 million curies of radioactivity. It is estimated to be the most curies under one roof in the United States. The blue glow is created by the Cherenkov Effect which describes the electromagnetic radiation emitted when a charged particle, giving off energy, moves faster than light through a transparent medium. The temperatures of the capsules are as high as 330 degrees Fahrenheit. The pool of water serves as a shield against radiation; a human standing one foot from an unshielded capsule would receive a lethal dose of radiation in less than 10 seconds. Hanford is among the most contaminated sites in the United States.

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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



All images
Jeff Bark
Untitled, 2007
from the *Woodpecker* series
courtesy Michael Hoppen Contemporary



"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

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

Mined in China

The fourteen photographers featured in the multi-screened, multi-media 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.

Wang MianLi
Transportation, Shandong, n.d.
Transportation Railway in Yanzhou
Coal Mine Cooperation



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



above:
Geng YunSheng
Wumeng miners, Zhenxiang, Yunnan,
December 2002
They're at the age of receiving education, but they have to work here because of poverty.

above, right
WangDajiang / 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:
DongLin
Datong, Shanxi, May 2007

left:
Niu Quo Zheng
Smoke No.038, Henan, December 2006
Yellow smoke (SO₂) gushes out of furnaces with an outdated coking technique.





Wang MianLi / China Features
Yanzhou Coal Mine (The irrigation area under the mine), Shandong, May 2006

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 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


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.

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 unacquainted.

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."

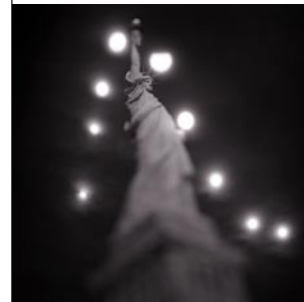
Nowhere is this contradiction more evident than in coal country.

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."

And so, it was during the course of this dispiriting trip that I came to believe that in order to understand what is happening China, one must grasp one the importance of coal: where it comes from, how it is mined, how it is transported and then burned. For, if coal has been responsible for much of China's enormous success, it is also coming to be responsible for more and more of its most grievous failures. 

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

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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 seriously and his sculptural practice began to emerge. Although he had begun studying commercial art and quickly discovered an interest in painting, by 1963, photography and sculpture eclipsed painting as the focuses of his artwork. Today, he is most widely known for his photographs.

Christenberry’s first camera, a simple, inexpensive “Brownie,” produced a soft-focused image that he found analogous to his own visual memories. Although he has adopted more sophisticated cameras over the years, he continues to use Brownie cameras, for which he has film custom made. (He thus far has refused to go digital.) A large closet in the studio holds these cameras, modern and archaic. It also holds meticulously organized binders 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...”¹

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 ironic 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.²

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

1. “Unpacking my Library,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illusions* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 60.
2. William Christenberry. *Christenberry Reconstruction: The Art of William Christenberry*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi and Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, 1996), 149. Christenberry had several formative encounters with the Klan in the early 1960s see also Allen Tulos “Into the Territory: William Christenberry’s Klan Room” in Suzanne Lange, ed., *William Christenberry* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), 84-95

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Inside the Artist's studio





Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao

by Tom Finkelpearl

Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao
 69th Street, Woodside, 2004
 Chromogenic photograph
 20 x 48 inches
 © Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao. Courtesy of the artist
 and Julie Saul Gallery, NY.



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 *Sports Illustrated* interview in 1999 Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker famously derided the number 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

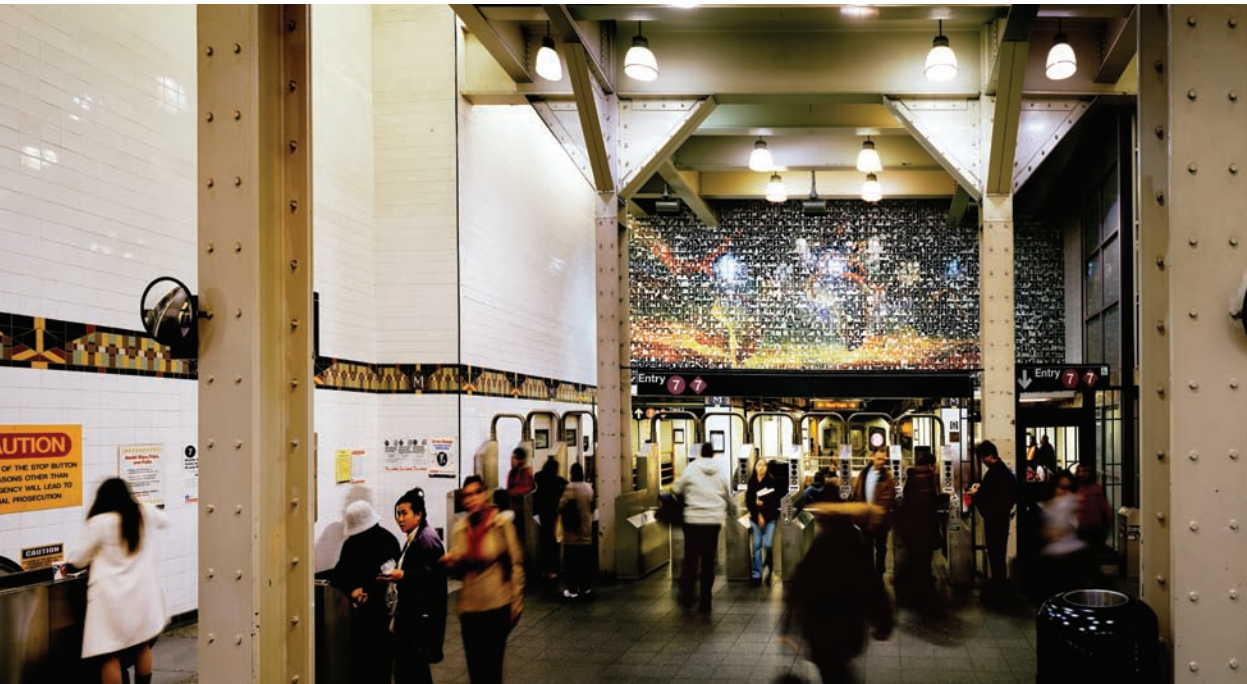
on a daily basis in 1999 just after his famous rant made it from the sports page to the mainstream news. It seemed that there was a television crew at every stop for a couple of weeks after the article came out, interviewing the passengers and community residents. From that time forward, the 7 train 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 look past the architectural banality and cultural exoticism. Each photograph in the series exhibits a remarkable attention to detail.



Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao
5 Pointz, Long Island City, 2004, Queens, New York
 Pigment Ink Print, 40 x 96 inches
 © Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao. Courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, NY.

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.”² 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 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).*



top, left:
 Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao
7 Train Entrance, 2004, Manhattan, New York
 Pigment Ink Print
 40 x 96 inches
 © Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao. Courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, NY.

top, right:
 Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao
LIRR, Hunter’s Point, 2004, Queens, New York
 Pigment Ink Print
 40 x 96 inches
 © Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao. Courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, NY.

Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao
7 Train Exit, Manhattan, 2005
 Pigment Ink Print
 40 x 96 inches
 © Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao. Courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, NY.

1. The International Express: Around The World On The 7 Train: The Queens Tribune web site: www.queenstribune.com/anniversary2002/internationalexpress.htm
 2. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2005), 97.

Their enthusiasm for their neighborhood was infectious, and they ended by saying together in unison, “Queens, the Borough of Dreams.”

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.

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 cluttered 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 Barragan 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 time. AES+F are a group of Russian artists, thinkers, and writers old enough now to have teenage kids. Inspired by these younger generations’ seamless, integrated transitions from the virtual to the actual, AES+F create classical-looking tableaux of expressionless youths enacting murderous historical scenes, complete with swords, togas, and armor.



Birthe Piontek
Untitled #1, 2006
from the series *Sub Rosa*
Chromogenic color print,
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy the artist and
Charles Guice Contemporary



left:
Daniel & Geo Fuchs
Sin City, 2004-2007
C-Print / Plexiglass / Dibond
49.2 x 63 inches
Courtesy Gallery Caprice Horn




below:
AES+F
Last Riot 2: The Tank and Waterfall, 2006
Lambda print on paper
24 x 47 inches
Image Courtesy of Claire
Oliver Gallery, New York

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 Trumpian, 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, germs, and steel).

AES+F’s kids have a lot of company out there. Expressionless youths in trouble 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 doe-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 crafty 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. 

Photography in Miami by Titus O’Brien

Marion Ackermann (ed.)
Josephine Meckseper
Hatje Cantz, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2007
168 pages, \$50



book cover:
Marion Ackermann, ed.
Josephine Meckseper
Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz/Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2007


photo:
Josephine Meckseper
Blow-Up (Tamara, Michelli, Laura), 2006
Digital C-Print
40.2 x 29.9 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee,
New York/Hatje Cantz

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. 

The corresponding exhibition was on view at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart from July 14 to October 28, 2007.



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Nan Goldin: Stories Retold

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Nan Goldin
Deborah and Noa kissing, 1994.
From the series *Tokyo Spring Fever Grid*, 1994-95.
Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.
© Nan Goldin, reproduced courtesy of the artist

Nan Goldin
The hug, NYC, 1980.
Featured in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*,
1981-2006/2007,
nine-part slide projection with soundtrack,
Private Collection, Houston, Texas.
© Nan Goldin, reproduced courtesy of the artist

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 repackaged, 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 slideshows. 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 filmic 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. She 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.



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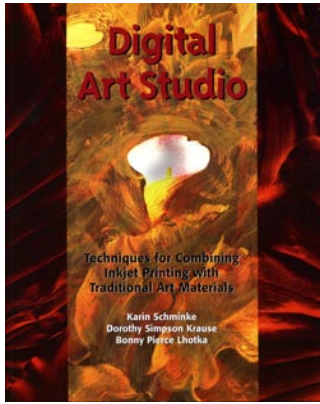
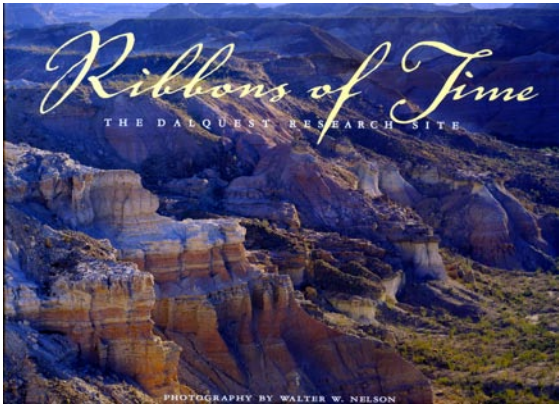
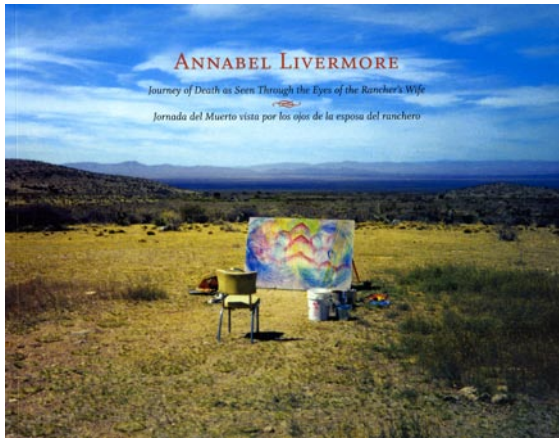
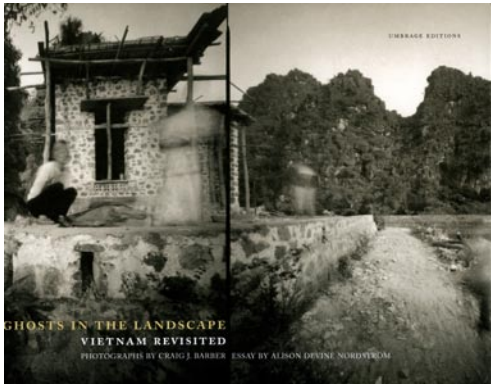


Cemetery Path, Perugia, Italy, 1980

George Krause

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