

Art & Architecture

Maybe Context Isn't Necessary

At LACMA, a display of photos linked only by acquisition date poses a challenge for viewers

Review

By HOLLY MYERS

Assembling a museum-quality collection of contemporary photographs—one that reflects the concerns of the present in a way that will also speak to the future—is no easy task. Reducing that collection at any given time to one meaningful and coherent exhibition is, no doubt, even harder.

Judging from "New Acquisitions, New Work, New Selections 3: Contemporary Selections," the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has approached the challenge by casting a wide net. In the last five years, the photography department, led by curator Robert Sobieszek, has acquired more than 1,000 works, the majority of them produced since 1940. This exhibition assembles about 80 of the most recent, each by a different artist.

It amounts to a lot of unconnected work, which makes the exhibition something of a challenge for the viewer. It's difficult to properly engage with individual photographs in this context—that is, without a context.

With the diversification of the medium during the past few decades, the designation of "contemporary" offers little in the way of a framework. In the absence, also, of geographical limitations (more than a third of the artists represented were born outside the United States) or a concrete thematic superstructure, the works are only so many fragments floating against a neutral background.

That said, the primary purpose of the exhibition is not to promote the value of individual artworks, but to offer the public a glimpse into the museum's acquisition process. One does leave the show longing to see more from the assembled photographers, which means the museum is surely doing something right.



The encyclopedia illustrations in Gerhard Richter's "48 Portraits" (1998) reveal a Western tendency to associate greatness with white men. Photos courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

While there is no single, dominant sensibility behind the diverse collection of work, a few notable tendencies emerge. Principal among these is an avid interest in the versatility of the medium. There are photographs here of nearly every sort: from traditional black-and-white gelatin silver prints to big, saturated Cibachromes to computer-generated collages to photographic reproductions of paintings.

On the traditional side, for example, is Brad Cole's elegant, Ansel Adams-like view of a rocky seashore or Linda Connor's haunting exploration of overgrown temple ruins in Angkor, Cambodia. Of a more conceptual nature is "Razorback" (1990), by German artist Hanno Otten: a large image of nothing but a green movie theater curtain, presumably after it has closed on the

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Danger lurks in Simen Johan's haunting "Untitled No. 87" (2000).

► **"NEW ACQUISITIONS, NEW WORK, NEW SELECTIONS 3: CONTEMPORARY SELECTIONS,"** Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. **Dates:** Through Aug. 18. Open Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, noon-8 p.m.; Fridays, noon-9 p.m.; Saturdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; closed Wednesdays. **Prices:** Adults, \$7; students 18 and older and seniors, \$5; children 5-17, \$1; younger than 5, free. **Phone:** (323) 857-6000.

Photos: Show Notes Trend Toward Image Manipulation

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film that provides the work's title. James Welling's "Degradé #17" (1992)—a two-tone color field image—is an example of the move toward complete abstraction.

Also central to the exhibition is the question of manipulation. The majority of works on view involve some degree of it, whether chemical, digital, compositional or emotional, and the wall texts (although sporadic and largely uneven) frequently urge viewers to evaluate its role in construction of an image.

The issue can seem at times forced, in the work—such as Nagatani and Tracey's "34th & Chambers" (1986), a large and rather garish montage—as well as in the labels. Particularly irritating, for example, is the wall text for Peter Garfield's "Mobile Home" (1994), which seems intent on flattening the work's delightful ambiguity by dangling the obvious questions: "Is this plausible? Might an artist have actually rented a large helicopter to carry a full-sized bungalow and drop it so that it could be photographed falling to earth?"

Far more exciting are the subtle examples of manipulation that one stumbles upon unexpectedly, as in Nancy Burson's portrait of a man with an eye patch that is decorated with a strangely sad drawing of the eye that it covers, or Mike Smith's view of a rural Tennessee landscape that's been flattened and abstracted merely through clever positioning of the camera.

If there's anything that seems to be on the outs, as forecast by this exhibition, it is the mystique of the decisive moment. With few exceptions (notably, a Lee Friedlander image of a telemarketer frozen in an amusingly twisted grimace), the vast majority of the works in the exhibition are pointedly altered, posed, staged, naturally still (as in a landscape), or appropriated. Whether it be a reflection of the general artistic climate or of curatorial taste, trust in the magic of the photographic accident appears to be all but extinct.

The strongest works in the show, as is typically the case in exhibitions, transcend any particular theme or issue. These include James Casebere's enigmatic but luminous landscape of water and light; Miwa Yanagi's smart, stylized diptych of Japanese elevator girls trapped in a sterile interior



Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Image manipulation, as seen in an untitled Gerald Slota print (1998).

corridor; Simen Johan's hauntingly ambiguous image of a young boy clinging dangerously to a black cat; Gregory Crewdson's elaborately staged depiction of a woman kneeling in a flower garden that's somehow landed in the middle of a suburban kitchen; and Eric Rondopierre's "Convulsion" (1996-98), a blown-up porn still that has to suggest that the sprawling nude female figure it depicts has, in her apparent rapture, been coated with a creepy alien substance.

Striking works by some familiar names from northern Europe round out the selection nicely. Although Wolfgang Tillmans is notably absent, Thomas Ruff and Rineke Dijkstra both appear with stunningly sharp and memorable portraits, while Thomas Struth is represented by an image from his museum series that should startle anyone who has only seen his work in reproductions. Although seemingly banal in subject matter, it exudes an ethereal and photographically inexplicable glow that may well make it the most enticing single object in the exhibition. (It whets the appetite for Struth's MOCA exhibition in September.)

The most outstanding work in the show, by considerable measure, is Gerhard Richter's "48 Portraits" (1998), which literally reproduces a series of paintings made by the artist in 1972 of important European and American men who were born in the 19th century, copied from

photomechanical illustrations in a German encyclopedia.

Each of the 48 images is, essentially, a photograph of a painting made from a photograph, which results in a subtle but remarkably complicated mingling of diverse visual properties: the stiff flatness of the original image, the faint sensuality of the paint, and the liquid-like veneer of the final photograph.

Installed in a grid on three adjacent walls, the work fills the space with an eerie and intimidating grayness. The stark rows of disembodied heads speak to the tendency of Western culture to locate greatness in the minds of white men.

Rather than inspiring respect for their enduring accomplishments, however, it leaves one reeling from the oppressiveness of the austere pantheon, longing for a glimpse of their bodies to restore a sense of balance and humanity.

It is a breathtaking and profoundly discomfiting work that should merit a prominent position in LACMA's permanent galleries when it comes to be installed there.

As for the rest of the new acquisitions, their fate is somewhat less certain: No doubt most will be quickly consigned to the safety of a flat drawer, available for framing when the appropriate occasion arises. This exhibition is a useful opportunity to peek into that drawer before it closes. □

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