

San Francisco Chronicle

MATT LIPPS: Artist Looks at Our Relationship with Photography

Written by Kimberly Chun
March 26, 2014



Art, 2013, C-Print

The act of taking photographs, in a world where the production of images is accelerating at a retina-rattling pace, lies at the core of S.F. artist Matt Lipps's work. That preoccupation came around once more for "The Populist Camera," which sees the San Francisco State assistant professor picking up, turning over and re-examining the imagery of one primary source: Time-Life's 70s-era "Life Library of Photography" book series. Lipps cut out iconic images from the volumes, which focused on teaching budding 35mm photographers the techniques, applications and history of the medium; grouped them on glass shelves in boxes backed with blown-up reproductions of his own youthful attempts to mimic masters like Irving Penn; and rephotographed them. We talked to Lipps, 38, by phone.

Q: What does "The Populist Camera" mean to you?

A: I think of it as a democratic camera, a camera as an everyday object in your life. This body of work comes from the Time-Life "Library of Photography" series, which was delivered to people's homes and capitalized on the moment when every family was getting a single-lens reflex camera and people were setting up darkrooms at home. It was technical and nonhierarchical and showed you the commercial applications of studio photography but also how to take a photo of your child at sunset.

Q: Did you read the books at the time?

A: I learned photography in the manner of these books, a simpler way to take images in the '70s and '80s. I don't think Time-Life knew that photography would become so integrated into our daily life. Every person in San Francisco probably has a camera in their pocket on their phone and has this relationship with these images. Photography has always been the content of my work, so this is my direct engagement to what this medium means to me now and sort of looking at the history of photography and the many things that went into forming the history and how we create memories around it. It's interesting to me that we live in a photographic mind-set, creating memories for the future. If you have a birthday party, you want to get that image of candles being blown out and everyone looking happy.

Q: Are you an advocate of slow photography?

A: Yeah, I am. People look at my pictures for a long time and play games, like, who is that? I have a massive spreadsheet that will tell me who everyone is because that gets asked a lot, and people do slow down because they're trying to figure out what everything is. My whole project is about being with photographs and spending time with them.