



ART PRACTICAL

MATT LIPPS: “The Populist Camera” Review

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In the early 1970s, Time Life published the *Library of Photography*, an approachable, comprehensive, seventeen-volume instructional manual for the making and care of photographs. The series was fully illustrated with hundreds of black-and-white images drawn from *Life* magazine’s immense archive of mass-media and fine-art photographs. In *The Populist Camera*, on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery, Matt Lipps playfully disassembles the *Library of Photography* and reassembles its raw material into an alternative archive.

Each of Lipps’ nine large-scale chromogenic prints is a curiosity cabinet that invites viewers on a scavenger hunt through photographic history. To make each photograph, Lipps employs a labor-intensive process refined through works from earlier series such as *HORIZON/S* (2010)¹. Each black-and-white image is cut from the pages of the *Library of Photography* and then mounted on cardboard. The resulting paper-doll-like figures are arranged into thematic groups, re-photographed, and enlarged. The final prints juxtapose the black-and-white appropriated images with colorful backdrops drawn from Lipps’ own 35mm negatives from when he was a photography student. In *Art* (2013), Lipps presents a trove of images—some iconic artworks and others less identifiable—neatly arranged on three shelves in front of a vibrant blue-green background depicting an electric fan. Bill Brandt’s *Nude London* (1952) is wedged on the top shelf next to what looks like a Weston still life of calla lilies. On the middle shelf, a nude torso abuts a shot of power lines crisscrossing a cloudy sky. Part of the challenge—and pleasure—in Lipps’ prints is decoding individual appropriated images and the relationships that might be in play on each shelf and in the work as a whole.

Sometimes, the works defy interpretation. The diptych *Themes* (2013) features a washed-out yellow-pink backdrop with a woman bare from the waist up, arms folded across her chest on the left panel; on the right, that same woman wears rolled-up jeans and a bra and leans provocatively on a ladder. The conflation of a female body with hardware is echoed throughout the images staged on the shelves: scissors, pliers, and even an airplane appear next to fragmented bodies and forms. The appropriated images, deliberately trimmed to remove some details, are hard to decipher. The internal juxtapositions are so far detached from the images’ original context that any attempt at constructing a narrative or divining meaning is confounded.

Allan Sekula wrote that structurally, “The archive is both an abstract entity and a concrete institution. [It] is a vast substitution set, providing for a relation of general equivalence between images.”² This exhibition affirms Lipps’ practice as an archival one, as he sifts through photographic history and creates new equivalences and relationships. Much as the *Library of Photography* aims to universalize the pleasures of the camera and the photograph, in *The Populist Camera*, Lipps reveals the structure of the archive to the public, laboriously dismantling and reinventing the form to expose its arbitrary nature.