

**MATT LIPPS: Review of "The Populist Camera"**

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April 14, 2014



Matt Lipps, 1973 -1975, 2014

*The Populist Camera* is an exhibition of large-scale photographs that combine images the artist created early in his career with those culled from the Time-Life *Library of Photography*, a series of how-to manuals designed to teach amateurs photography. The series, which ended in 1975, a year before Lipps was born, was issued in modules: *Documentary*, *Children*, *Travel* and so forth. Each contains iconic images drawn from news events, fashion, scientific inquiry and the history of fine art photography. Lipps excised them from the books, mounted them on cardboard and set them on shelves before backdrops that he created from his old negatives. These set-ups, when photographed, appear as theatrically lit *wunderkammers* – dioramas that could be perceived as exercises in nostalgia were it not for the unique way in which Lipps frames and stages his acts of appropriation.

By searching for and cutting out only particular objects of interest, Lipps invokes what Roland Barthes called the *punctum*, the moment of each photograph that “pierces the viewer,” as distinct from the *studium*, the symbolic meaning of the work. The punctum is, by definition, inherently personal, but by treating these images as serial collages, Lipps ensures that no viewer walks away un-pierced. Many artists, and photographers in particular deal in compulsive collections, but Lipps’ presentations are more in line with Mark Dion’s cabinets. Both artists combine the stringent methodology of a historian, mining the recent past with the zeal of a fan. The final arrangements leverage the many valences between images, giving the impression of being at once sentimental and analytical, ironic and sincere.

The dominating triptych, *1973-1975*, is a representative example. At its geometric center is Kim Phuc, the infamous Vietnam War-era "Napalm Girl", naked and screaming. Richard Nixon famously wondered if the shot had been staged, and here it certainly has been: around, above and below her we see laughter, glamor shots, nudes in repose, lovely cut flowers and muscle cars. Lipps has deployed his "actors" to maximize the connections between forms and meanings – creating them where they would not otherwise exist. The iconic blends with the cliché to create a rapid-fire pattern of recognition and memory as your eyes move from one black and white cutout to the next. Significantly, one's reactions to these collages are likely turn on whether you recognize these actors, which in turn depends on when you were born. I remember the moon landing; it happened more than 15 years before I was born. But I have memories of it. My memories, like Lipps', come exclusively from images seen after the fact. For Lipps, and for anyone born after *Library* was published, the appropriated photos don't evoke memories so much as constitute them.

Beyond the cutouts and their references, there's a formal aspect that lends the work a sumptuous, affective character. Each piece has a highly saturated background drawn from Lipps' early negatives. Those pictures are colorized with bold, often primary gradients in a digital effect akin to solarization. The background imagery is often cliché, sometimes painfully so. The diptych *Themes*, which features a model on a ladder, chases after Irving Penn's *The Twelve Most Photographed Models of 1947*. Lipps, an assistant professor at SF State, maintains he'd never attempt to do now what he did so earnestly as a student. Still, the pictures impart a definite sense of loss, the envy of an artist who's learned well from the past and knows he can't inhabit it.

If any of these pieces attempt formal beauty, it's *Tool*. Named for the volume *Photography as Tool*, this piece breaks free of the social and historical references of the other works. It celebrates the camera as way of seeing: in the high-speed flap of a bird's wings slowed, a cascade of water frozen, the structure of plants and microscopic yeast spores made visible through magnification, and the range beyond human vision afforded by X-ray, infrared and various filters. Lipps remains enamored with the camera's special way of seeing. His own way of seeing, evidenced in the 11 prints on view, expresses how photography recontextualizes and constrains the real. The Time-Life series was published at a time when photography was expanding to the masses. Now, with a camera riding in everyone's pocket, it's rocketed to ubiquity. Lipps reminds us how strange and theatrical a photo inherently is and how easily it replaces a memory, or becomes one itself.