

MATT LIPPS: "Secondhand at Pier 24 Photography- Transforming Old into New"

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Matt Lipps, Untitled (Women's Heads) 2010 Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist And Jessica Silverman Gallery, Same

To make a picture, Matt Lipps gets out a stack of picture books and magazines and takes an X-Acto knife to them.

When he has cut them into a pile of 200 images he builds a cardboard backing for each one so that it can stand on a shelf. He arranges and rearranges the scenes on the shelf as if he were a stage director, taking care to get the juxtaposition and the shadows and lighting just right. It could be six months before he is ready to make an image with his digital view camera.

"I make photographs about photography," says Lipps, whose work fits the criterion for "Secondhand," a comprehensive exhibition of found and reused images at

Pier 24 Photography, the mammoth museum on the San Francisco waterfront.

The show, which runs through May, examines the work of John Baldessari, Larry Sultan and other pioneers in the use of existing pictures to make new ones, an area known as vernacular photography. ID badges, crime scene photos, baseball cards, and press photos cropped in grease pencil, evolve into digital works and blogs. One gallery room, arranged by Erik Kessels, contains a floor-to-ceiling avalanche of prints representing every image uploaded to Flickr in a 24-hour period.

Pier 24 is 28,000 square feet, making it the largest photography-only venue in the world. It stages one show a year and limits annual attendance to 20,000 visitors by appointment. Admission is free, and the work on display usually comes from the vast collection of its benefactor, Andy Pilara, a retired San Francisco investment adviser. This includes "Untitled (Archive)" an 18-foot panorama by Lipps, 39, who lives South of Market and is the only living Bay Area artist represented in "Secondhand."

"This show is getting at the blur between creator and curator that is happening in blog culture," says Chris McCall, director of Pier 24. "People are sourcing images as their starting point and Matt is one of these people. He reflects a trend."

Decade of magazine

Lipps gets his own gallery for his series "Horizon/s," which he made by cutting up, rearranging and rephotographing 10 years' worth of copies of Horizon, a high-end lifestyle magazine that was hardbound and home-delivered in the 1960s and '70s. He came upon it six or seven years ago, when his boyfriend, Barry Pett,

held a garage sale and produced old copies of the periodical. There was no market, not even as a giveaway, so Lipps took the set to see whether he could make art out of it.

"I'd never heard of the magazine, and it wasn't until I was flipping through that I was so charmed by it," he says. "It came out every few months, and it was a curated event."

As the project got going, he went online and bought 10 years' worth of "Horizon" (1958-68), each volume dense with art and antiquities that you could go around the world trying to see. Or you could see pictures of them all in one room, which is the thinking behind Lipps' style of photography.

"A printed image is how 99.9 percent of us experience art objects, because very few of us go out and see them in person," says Lipps, an assistant professor of art, on tenure track, at San Francisco State. He teaches photography, but not the kind of photography he practices. Most students are interested in street photography, and the only pictures Lipps takes are in his one-room studio on Market Street, across from Zuni Cafe.

No logic to placement

He is not a collage artist because his photograph, with its mood and lighting, is the finished product. But it is certainly closer to collage than the fine art photography he decided to pursue while a student at American High School in Fremont. He originally wanted to be a painter, but when he figured out he could not draw, his mother bought him a Pentax K1000.

Then he figured out he couldn't really take a picture, either, in comparison to the masters he tried to copy, Ansel Adams and Irving Penn. So he started cutting up fashion magazines and making stand-up paper dolls. Eventually he brought the two together and started making photographs of the paper dolls - and that has been his genre ever since, through his BFA at Long Beach State and his MFA at UC Irvine. "Whatever images I respond to, I cut out, and then they pile up on the table top and start to speak to each other and build their own logic," he says. "Not all of these objects want to stand up on their own."

His major work, "Untitled," features 200 individual pictures. They don't tell a story, and there is no chronology or other logic to their placement.

"I curate these small events," he explains. "They speak about antiquities and cultural objects and our shared relationship to them. You are going to try to put it all together, but really it's sort of nonsensical and lyrical."

Having shredded "Horizon," Lipps has also taken his knife to the 17-volume "Life Library of Photography," which resulted in "The Populist Camera," a solo exhibition that debuted in March at Jessica Silverman Gallery in the Tenderloin. His work is labor-intensive and the source material increasingly limited.

"If I were a teenager taking pictures right now, my relationship to photographs would be totally different," he says. "I wouldn't have access to magazines to cut up. I would have a relationship to digital images."