

JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Matt Lipps: When Found Photographs Tell New Stories

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May 12, 2015

SAN FRANCISCO — Situated directly under the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, Pier 24 Photography occupies a 28,000 square foot warehouse originally built in 1935. The exhibition space — described as neither a museum nor a gallery — combines the original architecture of the pier with the sleek, neutral interiors common to contemporary art institutions. The converted, hybrid space creates a fortuitous parallel with Pier 24's current exhibition, *Secondhand*, which features thirteen artists who use found photographs to create composite images that examine the present through a reconstruction of the past.

In appropriating old photographs, these artists fold our notion of linear time into a kind of tightly wound spiral; when an image is recycled it moves toward a new identity, while still maintaining a reference to its original form. This layering simultaneously enriches and fragments an image, depending on what the artists choose to save or omit.

Many of the works on view in *Secondhand* are enhanced by their sculptural quality. Erik Kessels's installations, "Photo Cubes" (2007), "Album Beauty" (2012), and "24 HRS in Photos" (2013) are some of the largest in the exhibition, each of them exaggerated in size or quantity. Featuring waist-high plexiglass photo cubes, a room of wall-sized photo albums and cut-outs, and a floor-to-ceiling wave of 4x6 in. glossy drugstore photos, the works represent just a small portion of the countless found photographs Kessels has amassed in his search through other people's memories. In an interview with Pier 24, Kessels explained that he searches for the "beautiful mistakes" in vernacular photographs, and that "an amateur is someone who dares to make these mistakes." Kessels's unrelenting curiosity has given rise to a collection that reveals the miraculous imperfections — like one family's earnest though always unsuccessful attempts to photograph their black dog, resulting in a series of images that each feature a dog-shaped void — that can happen when people record their lives.

The unpretentious and unintentional gifts of amateur photographers take on an entirely different form through Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's project, "Evidence" (1977). Culled from over 100 public and private archives of corporations, government, medical and educational institutions, the black and white images prove that the real world is often much stranger than any fiction. Arranged on the wall in a narrative sequence, "Evidence" highlights Sultan and Mandel's masterful storytelling through editing: an image of what appears to be cots, trash cans, and fire extinguishers set up in an open field hangs on the wall next to an image of men and a tree silhouetted in a semi-transparent, cuboid greenhouse, creating a contradiction of indoor and outdoor spaces. Images that previously had no connection to each other suddenly become inseparably linked through visual or metaphorical connections.

Melissa Catanese uses a similar process of appropriation in "Dive Dark Dream Slow" (2012), though instead of "Evidence"'s cheeky surrealism, Catanese creates a hallucinatory narrative saturated with

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fear and desire: supine, bikini-clad women transform into stiff corpses or levitating bodies; a double exposure turns a woman's left and right profiles into an apathetic Mask of Janus; a trophy floating on a wall offers two options: win or lose. Through Catanese's hands, the images become a redacted poem born of the massive archive of vernacular photographs they were selected from: like very carefully placed windows in an otherwise impenetrable wall.

Secondhand also features contemporary photographers who combine found photographs with their own, which, though grounded in a more recent time frame, also play with the medium's ability to suspend and transcend time and space. For her series "World of Details" (2011–12), Viktoria Binschtok began by exploring the streets of New York City through Google Street View from her studio in Berlin, and taking screen shots of her digitally mediated encounters. She then traveled to NYC, and visited the locations of the screen shots and made large-format, analog color photographs of a detail within that location. Finally, she assembled them into diptychs as small, black and white screenshots and large color prints, which hang at staggered heights in one of Pier 24's rooms. The effect of Binschtok's intensive process of traveling through time and space is twofold: the extreme psychological isolation of the Google Street Image views – pixilated, grayscale, with any number of human faces blurred – carry a humanizing intimacy through the color images. Binschtok permeates the cold, digital exterior and shows her viewers the remarkable specificities of these otherwise unremarkable spaces.

In a similar, though more localized compression of time and place, Daniel Gordon and Matt Lipps re-photograph collages of found images to reference the histories of art and advertising media to create uncannily three-dimensional spaces within the two-dimensional photographic plane. Gordon builds life-size, three-dimensional objects, which he then arranges as raucous and gaudy still lifes that joyously undermine their traditional compositions with bright colors and clashing patterns. Lipps gathered images from *Horizon Magazine*, published 1958–1989, whose goal was to present the American people with a model of "good taste." He regroups the images into his own categories, such as "youth," "shape," or "women's heads," to examine the ways in which the media represents different aspects of culture.

Viewing the found photographs in *Secondhand* elicits the inevitable seduction of digging through a stranger's recorded life, looking for the intimate secrets about who that person was. The artists in the exhibition treat the entire history of images as a kind of family album for the human race, offering viewers a way to reconsider the way in which photography moves between the past and present.