

# ARTFORUM

Catherine Wagner: "Catherine Wagner: Fraenkel Gallery"

Bill Berkson

November 1989



Notre Dame des Victoires School, 6th Grade Classroom, "Observing Skin's Protective Role." *American Classroom* 1987

Catherine Wagner is a particularist whose black and white photographs discriminate, as she says, "more than the eye is used to seeing." This small show comprised prints chosen from the three main series she has completed over the past decade: "George Moscone Site," 1979-82, "The Louisiana World Exposition," 1984- 85, and "American Classroom," 1982-87. As the titles suggest, her subjects have tended to be the purposeful spaces of public architecture and schools. The subjects have a reflexive pitch, as if Wagner's eye and her camera had set out to rediscover their own intentions through confronting the dense patterns of big-scale building construction and the bland machinery of education. Thus, the images themselves derive from slow, conscientious study through the viewfinder, and as compositions they are intricately, even grandly, engineered. Altogether, they propose an objective photographic grammar that is no less vibrant for being clear.

In the "Moscone" series, a burgeoning convention center's massive mess appears bound by an inherent rationale, like that of wading birds all facing the same way at dusk. Thatches of scaffoldings, rebars, planks, and pipes recall Robert Smithson's designating the late-industrial buildup along the Passaic River as "ruins in reverse." By contrast, the wall-to-wall systematizing devices common to just about every kind of schoolroom - from Sunday school to a high-tech

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science lab- look as specious, if not downright satanic, as the rubrics ("Transmission Theory," in an auto mechanics' school, is one) under which learning is advanced.



Vista from Monorail, *The Louisiana World Exposition*, 1984

Wagner's pictures are long on discovery and sensation and reduced in regard to attitude. In framing her subjects, she exercises a gritty reticence along with a sharp feeling for surface-wide abstract organization and lapidary detail. She seems to read each space as a syntactic tissue in which every hairbreadth variant stands out. The images are rendered mostly from suspended standpoints, so that looking at them makes uncertain the observer's imaginary bodily relation to the scene. Wagner favors horizontal formats full of horizontal divisions, typically from edge to edge in the lower third of the frame. Tension and a concomitant, sometimes dizzying lushness spread across the print. Even the occasional blurs seem choreographed. Indeed, by way of lengthy exposures and adjustments within the depth of field, they rid the images of just those minutiae that would prove distracting: the lettering on a fairground flag against cloud contours, a newspaper layout across from a graffiti-infested deskchair. Contrariwise, in *University of Texas, Speech and Hearing Institute, Houston, Texas*, 1985, each node of fabric in an oval braided rug has entered the wide lens to make its tactile point-and these modular thematic glimmers are answered in kind by the bricks in the wall and by rows of alternating happy and frown faces on the blackboard centered upon it. Given the protracted moment, the world with its various marching orders beams in.

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A noninterfering, speculative classicism underlies the transparency and distance Wagner's approach allows. The social data are all there, loaded into her pictures, but the longer you look, the less instrumental in terms of social science they seem. Instead, the pictures broadcast the mystery that can accumulate about any profusion of closely rendered things, the enigmas that multiplicity in coincidence provides. Instead of a developed theory -of perception or culture, or both-they show the primacy of looking, with the emphasis that "theory," at its root, is tied to sight.



*Arch Construction II, George Moscone Site, 1981*

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