

FORT GANSEVOORT

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ART; Faces in Photographs; A Region Vividly Portrayed

By William Zimmer – September 17, 2000

VIEWERS might have to continually reassure themselves that the show at the Yale University Art Gallery is "The Persistence of Photography in American Portraiture," not "The Persistence of Portraiture in American Photography." The two possibilities, rather than cause confusion, however, underline the fluid, open-ended nature of the exhibition.

The show, whose curators are the gallery director, Jock Reynolds, and Jason Kakoyiannis, a graduate student in art history, opens with the unattributed observation, "There are more photographs than bricks." The abundance of photographic images in contemporary life is the real subject of the show and some of the works on view are photographs of photographs. Linda S. Connor's "Bureau Top, Norwalk" from 1967, for example, is labeled a constructed picture; it features a wealth of family photographs that Ms. Connor layered on top of one another.

Early on, there are suggestions that photography is often a sleight. James Van Der Zee, the chronicler of Harlem in the 1920's, used a painted backdrop in the studio wedding portrait, "Future Expectations." Next to the Van Der Zee is Walker Evans's "Minstrel Poster (Birmingham, Ala.)," a reminder that life-size painted figures are perennial subjects.

Another Evans is "The Cactus Plant (Interior Detail of a Portuguese House, Truro, Mass.);" from an early 1930's "Fishing Series." Dominating the picture is a fearsome-looking plant. The family photographs next to it seem incidental, but the picture might be interpreted as a demonstration that life is perilous.

The show is full of such seeming departures and byways. At the entrance to the gallery are two chairs (losing their stuffing) set against a backdrop of pine boards bearing a full-length drawing of a man who seems to be posing for the camera. This tableau is the contemporary artist Whitfield Lovell's evocation of an early photography studio, reminiscent of Van Der Zee's.

In the course of the show, viewers will come upon a sculpture grouping done to scale, Marisol Escobar's "Dinner Date." The trademark of the artist (who is also known simply as Marisol) is drawing and painting human figures on beam-like lengths of wood. These pieces are four-sided, which means that she can illustrate different aspects of a personality.

One of the photographs displayed behind the sculpture is Ralph Eugene Meatyard's "Madonna." This is essentially a woman in silhouette, and if viewers look over to the work by Marisol they can see a similar concentration on contour lines.

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Several photographers whose work is familiar and who specialize in people are included. Works by Lee Friedlander strategically show up numerous times. The work of Helen Levitt is described in wall text as lyrical and does seem to be counterpoint to other more hard-edged work. Some younger photographers, a couple of them recent Yale graduates, are notable for the expansive size of their photographs.

A lot of empty space surrounds the figure in Dawoud Bey's "Man Looking at Pants on Fulton St." Katie Murray, who got her degree this year, capitalizes on the long arcs and other long lines of car windows to frame her figures. Hers are the only color photographs in the first section of the exhibition. Like the curators, viewers will be disarmed by a section of photographs of charming children including "Nancy, Danville, Va." by Emmet Gowin. Most of them are by Judith Joy Ross.

The second section of the show lives up to the exhibition's title for it features a lot of paintings that were clearly influenced by photography. William Beckman and Gregory Gillespie's self-portraits are meticulous and therefore very much like photography. The grainy gray background of most of Richard Artschwager's paintings is meant to simulate the static snow on early television sets. Several portraits by Chuck Close clearly display a dependence on photography, but viewers will be intrigued by some of his recent works, based on old-fashioned daguerreotypes that dispense with the grid. But the grid is appropriated in miniature by the Korean-born American Do-Ho Suh, who lines up a multitude of tiny high school yearbook photographs from Korea. The point, say the curators, is a "flattening of personal difference under a collective national identity."

Collective regional identity is the theme of a second show at Yale. "Southern Exposure: Works by Winfred Rembert and Hale Woodruff." What unites the two artists, other than a vivid portrayal of life, is a reliance on unusual or lowly art materials. The Woodruff works, selected from a portfolio bought by the gallery, are linocuts, made by carving and inking cheap flooring material. Mary Kordak, the museum's education curator who organized the show, says that linoleum has a "rich expressive character," and Mr. Woodruff exploited this to the fullest with sharp, rapid alternation of black and white. The result is that even the most laconic images, such as a man on a mule, look like conflagrations. It's as if the mood of the whole portfolio is set by the most inflammatory scene, a lynching.

Mr. Rembert is an Outsider artist who carves images on hand-dyed leather. He grew up in rural Georgia but now lives in New Haven. His art is disarming in a Grandma Moses way.

His forte is depicting a horde of people milling about, taking in whatever event is presented. Thus his triptych on the subject of lynching is not horrible on its face. Rather its terrible nature lies in the way that lynching is presented as something not that out of the ordinary.

"The Persistence of Photography in American Portraiture" and "Southern Exposure: Works by Winfred Rembert and Hale Woodruff" are at the Yale University Art Gallery through Nov. 25.