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Photography

What's NEW in NYC Photo?

By Carl Gunhouse

Friday, March 7, 2009

Robert Miller Gallery
524 W 26th St. Btw. 10th & 11th Aves.
Walter Niedermayar

Niedermayar's work makes you suspect that somewhere his assistant has a flicker page of amazing pictures taken while assisting Niedermayar in his creation of overly controlled minimalist compositions of otherwise amazing locations. Besides everything feeling like the life has been sucked out of it, the pictures themselves all tend to be a little blown out in the printing. If you are going to rely so heavily on things looking pretty, the least you can do is get the prints right. On the upside, they are huge, and if you stare long enough it might just induce a pleasant state of ambivalence.

Through March 14th
[Robert Miller Gallery](#)

Clamp Art
521-531 W 25th St. Btw. 10th & 11th Aves.
Rachel Papo *Desperately Perfect* and *Serial No. 3817131*

The thing about straight photography is that it's hard to define what separates the good from the bad. *Desperately Perfect* is a more than competent, if not excellent, documentation of young ballet dancers. There is nothing inherently bad about any of the pictures, yet they look like reporting not art. The pictures are made with utmost care and create a mood that would suggest Juilliard recruits right out of music-playing jewelry boxes and Monet paintings. But the work feels hollow, unchallenging. Now walk into the back corridor of Clamp Art, Where *No. 3817131* offers a series of Israeli women 18-20 during their mandatory military service. Somehow work transcends reportage to become art. The pictures involve the same demographic as a show on the WB, but along with the normal dramas of everyday life, the women carry large machine guns and what feel like an unduly grave sense of responsibility. The challenge to expectations, that incongruous fact that somewhere in the world undergrads go to the cafeteria wearing tank tops, shorts, flip-flops and large machine guns is what pushes the-work from reportage to art.

Through March 14th

Clamp Art

Robert Mann Gallery
210 11th Ave. Btw. 24th & 25th Sts.
Gail Albert Halaban, *Out My Window*

To quote a friend, at a certain age real estate becomes as enjoyable as sex. And in many ways, this feels like real-estate porn. The majority of the Halaban pictures show people in their apartments being photographed from an opposing building. The apartments are spaces that I will never inhabit outside the odd party or a random visit to a friend house-sitting for a distant relative. In New York, this is the kind of space that those who are young and of reasonable incomes don't even dream to imagine: where your living area would be lined with windows, with actual views of the city, where you don't need to transfer to a bus to get to. And what is possibly the most alarming part of the work is that these seem to be very ordinary people going through their lives unaffected by the opulence that they inhabit. How is it that they are in these apartments? How have they escaped the outer boroughs? And could we all someday have bubble baths that overlook Central Park?

Through March 28th
Robert Mann

Sonnabend
536 W 22nd St. Btw. 10th & 11th Aves.
Elger Esser, *Wrecks and Landscapes*

One day I'll walk into Sonnabend and see something new and interesting. This wasn't the day.

Through March 21st

Andrew Kreps Gallery
525 W 22nd St. Btw. 10th & 11th Aves.
To Be Determined

"...centered around a generation of artists whose work stretch the limits of photography. Portraiture and self-portraiture, archiving, and typology, as well as free-form fiction are at the core of their exploration of the medium....The selection of artists, some of whom would not consider themselves to be solely photographers, have interrogated the medium, and expanded its conventional definition. When looking at the group, one may question whether there is indeed a circumscribed, or unified practice of photography."

To Be Determined isn't a challenge to the norm, it is the norm. I think it is fair to say that stretching the limits of photography has been the theme of contemporary photography since the 1840's. Even more redundant are people who aren't strictly photographers trying to redefine what photography is. And this also applies to a large percentage of emerging photography of the last decade. The artist statement is drivel and seems to rise out of the general problem of defining a contemporary movement while it's going

on. And passive aggressively declaring there may or may not be something going on here. Well, I think it's fair to say there is something going on, and it is a world of post conceptual art. In these first hundred days of Obama, I think it is easy to look at many of the people in the show and see them as photographers for whom the great debates about set-up, the gaze, conceptualism, or the nature of photography are no longer a battleground of life and death.

These battles defined the acceptance of photography into the contemporary art dialogue, but they have now been exhausted. After An-My Le's documentaries and set-up pictures of people setting up the Vietnam war, do we really need more work examining photography's responsibilities to truth and reality? Do we really need more work about the gaze after Laurel Nakadate's amazing video of her exploiting men as they exploit her as the viewer exploits them both? And how many essays does Jeff Wall have to write until we all agree that photography can be a highly conceptual gesture? This isn't to say these arguments won't go on for sad eternity, but it's getting hard to claim they are new and contemporary.

What's more, thanks to the growth of higher education in the arts, fewer people can responsibly be making art unaware of these long and tired debates. You have a generation looking to make art that exists not to argue a partisan position but to put forth an idea for discussion. Can Walead Beshty make new photographs that incorporate photography history without making pictures that look like they are out of photography's history (and possibly without using a camera)? Can Roe Ethridge wallow in his love of contemporary vernacular photography while not re-appropriating found images? Can Phil Collins use Morrissey to express the pain of those most directly affected by world conflict? Can Torbjorn Rodland combine a bunch of random stuff in a body of work and mean something?

The answer is yes. This is, what photography has been doing of late. And what's more, the images have far surpassed the ideas that instigated them. Because you have a generation who have come up with a response to the initial question in every graduate school critique, the question of why? And the usual answer of late has been not nearly as interesting as the resulting work. Have you read Ethridge or Beshty explaining their art? It is conceptualism so dense it could be a loan adjuster's idea of poetry. These ideas become comprehensible only when taken out of the written language and put forth in the visual images that all art inevitably has to dwell in. The limitations of the past generation of photographers addressed are dead. Long live uninhibited art.

Is this addressed in *To Be Determined*? No, not really. The exhibition ends up being little more than an okay selection of the work of rather known contemporary photographers. This isn't a show for kids blogging while scanning negatives in grad school. It is a show for old people who are holding onto the past because they have lost the energy to look.

Through March 7th
[Andrew Kreps](#)