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The booth of Palo Alto's Modernbrook Gallery at Photo New York



640 480 Video Collective
Video Still
2005



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PHOTO NEW YORK by Ben Davis

Mystical close-ups of foliage or everyday objects. Long shots of desolate, near-empty streets or landscapes. Sculptural black-and-white images of the human butt.

Or, artists playing dress-up. Props or installations that overrun the images. Photoshop.

All this was on abundant display at **Photo New York**, Oct. 6-9, 2005, the second iteration of the new photography fair sponsored by the **Stephen Cohen Gallery** and held in the spacious Metropolitan Pavilion on West 18th Street in Manhattan. Among the 38 exhibitors were **Bernard Toale Gallery** (Boston), **Michael Steinberg Fine Art** (New York) and **Kunsthanel Jorg Maass** (Berlin), along with nonprofits like **Printed Matter** and several individual artists brought in to do independent projects.

Piety and irreverence are the Scylla and Charybdis of contemporary photography. It seems that a photographer can't avoid one without falling into the trap of the other. But artists never stop trying -- and more than a few successfully navigate a new course between the two.

For instance, consider the Toronto-based **640 480 Video Collective**, a seven-artist group that takes its name from the traditional viewing size of the video screen. At their booth, located at the back of the hall by the café, were three *Video Stills* (\$1,200 each). These appear to be casual snapshots mounted in boxes hanging on the wall. On closer inspection, however, the prosaic images tremble with life -- they're actually videos made of 400 to 600 individual photographs taken as people attempted to hold the same pose.

The *Video Stills* can easily be read as a comment on the authenticity of photography, since what appears as unaffected reveals itself to be the work of laborious calculation. But there's more: the subtle movements rocking the "stills" unleash all kinds of associations, as if the image's unconscious were straining to the surface. An ill-framed picture of an awkward greeting between a prom couple trembles as if with thwarted sexual tension, while in another "still," a young man and woman hold out the camera to photograph themselves, and their strained effort to maintain their casual smiles seems to illustrate the futility of trying to preserve a moment of happiness with a photo.

Praxis International Art, which operates galleries in Buenos Aires and Miami as well as on East 73rd Street in Manhattan, featured three large color photographs by Argentine artist **Augusto Zanela** of his installations at MALBA, the recently opened Museum of Latin American Art in Buenos Aires. Zanela's *Flechas* (*variación de la ley Muller*) is a photo of an empty, brick-walled gymnasium. Floating at the center of the image, seemingly scrawled on the surface of the



Augusto Zanela
Flechas (variación de la ley Muller)
 2005
 Praxis Gallery, New York



Mona Breede
Durchgang (Doorway)
 1998
 KBP, Brooklyn



Miao Xiaochun
Orbit
 2005
 Walsh Gallery, Chicago

print, is the famous Müller-Lyon optical illusion -- a pair of lines of equal measure, one with "arrow heads" and the other with "fins," that appear to be of different lengths.

As it happens, however, Zanela has inscribed the lines directly onto the wall and floor of the gym, and done it perfectly, so that the illusion comes together only at the point in the room from which the picture is taken. The actual museum installations must be genuinely trippy -- but Zanela's photos stand on their own as a way of poking fun at the camera's ability to tell lies.

Producing the same vertiginous effect but with a different gravity was the German photographer **Mona Breede** at the booth of the Brooklyn gallery **KBP**. Breede's small, carefully composed black-and-white images exude a quiet authority, and stood out from the rest of the street photography imagery at the fair. Her "Durchgang (Doorway)" photographs capture the labyrinthine layers of urban space glimpsed through a series of doorways. Each portal frames the next, with tiny figures glimpsed in the distance, almost lost in the repeating geometry of the architecture. Breede's photographs, which have already been the subject of several solo exhibitions in Europe but are little known in the U.S., are \$1,200 each.

The trend towards ever-larger prints was on display in the work of **Miao Xiaochun** at the stand of Chicago's **Walsh Gallery**. Xiaochun's wall-sized photo of traffic on one of Beijing's ring roads (\$18,000), mounted on four aluminum panels and digitally blending more information than can possibly be taken in by the human eye, takes its cues from German photographer Andreas Gursky by attempting to resolve the contradiction between straight and conceptual photography through sheer massiveness.

In another part of the pavilion, Walsh also presented a walk-through installation by Chinese artist **Wang Wei**, the floor of which was made out of large, illuminated images of the artist's head under water, accompanied by a subtle gurgling noise on a soundtrack. It was a cool and effectively ambiguous environment, and a treat for everyone who has dreamed of walking on the face of an artist (\$2,000 each for the photos, \$16,000 for the lot).

Walsh Gallery's fellow Chicagoans at **Gescheidle** had a clear hit with the New York-based **Jen DeNike's** "Vampire Portraits," staged scenes of adolescent subjects lying as if dead, with sloppy ropes of blood oozing from their necks (the large 60 x 40 in. *Francis* was \$4,000). Squarely within the tradition of "let's play dress-up" photography, the "Portraits" nevertheless exude an undercurrent of real uneasiness about the darker side of pent-up teenage aggression. (The booth also featured DeNike's hypnotic video of herself flopped in the surf, corpselike, in her underwear, which was included last month as part of **Justin Lowe's** "back room" installation at **Printed Matter**.)

More flamboyant still are **Andy Diaz Hope's** "Morning After Portraits" at San Francisco's **YOO Projects**, carefully composed images of drug paraphernalia and hang-dog men which are "photomosaics" created by inserting tiny photos into clear gel capsules and arranging them in a large grid. Also using a mosaic technique is Stephen Cohen Gallery's own **Thomas Kellner**, whose work -- pseudo-Cubist renderings of famous monuments and skylines constructed from endless individual snaps taken from slightly different perspectives -- was featured on the cover of the Photo New York catalogue for the second year running.



Installation shot of Wang Wei's *1/30th of a Second Underwater*

Both Diaz Hope and Kellner make works that are decidedly light-hearted, though they clearly attempt to take seriously the deconstruction of the image while retaining a certain craft and formal elegance.

Perhaps the best response to these conflicting drives came from California artist **Patterson Beckwith**, whose *Photo Studio* installation let visitors make up their own minds as to how seriously to take the photographic experience. Beckwith's booth featured camera equipment, a rack of costumes (including a complete set of Village People wardrobes), painted backdrops by **Frank Santoro** and the means to produce double exposures, so that visitors could pose next to themselves (in their spare time, **Beckwith and Co.** amused themselves by making homages to the Metropolitan Museum's current "Spirit Photography" exhibition).

"Some people want to know what the idea is," Beckwith said, reflecting on his time at Photo New York. "Others just come in to get portrait taken with their family."



Jen DeNike
Francis
2005
Gescheidle, Chicago

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Andy Diaz Hope
Modern Master
2005
YOO Projects, San Francisco



Thomas Kellner

England, Stonehenge

2002

Stephen Cohen Gallery, New York



One of Patterson Beckwith's "spirit portraits" at Photo New York