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Reviews



Among the photography exhibitions I saw, James Danziger's "The Year in Pictures" and Thomas Roma's "Pictures for Books" were of special interest to me. The former, shown at the James Danziger Gallery, included the work of

fifteen photographers previously featured on the blog, "The Year in Pictures." Every sampling of work, usually two to four pictures for each photographer, was totally distinct in style from the next set of photographs on the wall. In my opinion, the most unique photographs were taken by Chan-Hyo Bae and Stephen Gill. In his photographs from the series *Existing in Costume*, Chan-Hyo Bae convincingly disguises himself in dress, make up, and hairstyle as a noble woman of England, bearing a striking resemblance to paintings of Queen Elizabeth I. The scenes are staged meticulously with elaborately detailed clothing, austere expressions, and not a hair out of place. At first consumed by the study of these elements, I was surprised to notice the hands and face, not of a Caucasian woman, as expected, but of an Asian man. This part of the photograph gives the viewer most pause. The subject's radically different gender and race, as compared with subjects similarly rendered in history, caused me to be quite taken aback. Seeing the man behind the dress also conjured up images of drag queens and transvestite men, which added another possible layer of meaning. Altering the racial and sexual identity of the figure, which is frequently associated with European power and femininity at the time, produces a kind of subversive tone.

In small, color prints, Gill chooses cigarettes as his subjects, which are already smoked, lipstick smeared, and marked with letters of diverse languages. They are about two inches in height and are set vertically against a plain white background. Despite signs of consumption and grime, the white light and simplicity of the canvas make the cigarettes clean, pure, even beautiful. Standing upright, centered, and without any peripheral distraction, the cigarettes take on more weight as subjects and seem more like portraits, than still lifes. The burnt edges of the cigarettes and lipstick stains not only create a beautiful pink and brown color palette, but also infuse life into these otherwise lifeless objects. Most of all, I enjoyed looking at these photographs for Gill's depiction of cigarettes as I had never seen them. Many pictures show them in relation to a person, or as decaying objects of filth and waste. However, in this case, their context and visual presentation changed my aesthetic judgement of them.

I was exposed to Tom Roma's work for the first time at Columbia University's Gallery Talk, "Pictures for Books: A Conversation with Thomas Roma." The displayed photographs were spread among several rooms of the gallery and taken from his series' *Found in Brooklyn*, *Sicilian Passage*, and others. All black and white film prints, sized approximately 11x14, the viewer passed from room to room through different stages in Roma's career as a photographer. Back yards, urban vegetation, and residential landscapes of his native borough serve as the subjects of *Found in Brooklyn*. In *Sicilian Passage*, rural scenes in Sicily fill the frames with images of home life, shepherding, and open spaces. However, the photographs I found most compelling were not on the walls, but rather, in one of his books (aptly enough), entitled *Higher Ground*. The pictures from this series were taken on the New York subway of couples, adults, children, and strangers riding the train. I think that I was first struck by them because I have always wanted to try photographing people on the subway, but never had the courage to attempt it. In the pictures, everyone wears different expressions, some expectant, some tired, worried, meditative, etc. In many of the pictures, the subjects are illumined by natural sunlight. The almost tangible serenity conveyed by this light softens the common

image of the subway as a dark, dirty, and sometimes, ugly place. The subway, though, seems to serve more importantly as a constant stage for the ever varied gestures, actions, and emotions of the subway passengers themselves. I also appreciated the opportunity to make connections between the photographs and the photographer himself by hearing Mr. Roma speak about his work (both an enlightening and entertaining experience). In the end, I was captivated by one characteristic central to all three photographers' work. They took subjects which audiences are accustomed to seeing and understanding in a particular way, and visually reinterpreted them as to portray them almost oppositely.

A third exhibition of note was "No Man's Land" at the Rick Wester Fine Art Gallery, featuring photography by Dana Mueller and Bonnell Robinson. Mueller took pictures of former German prisoner-of-war camps in the US (1942-1945). Robinson photographed along the Western and Italian fronts of the Great War (1914-1918). Mueller exhibited her work in color, about ten pictures, on one side of the room, and on the other side of the room were Robinson's black and white photographs, also about ten in total.

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