

New Forms of Black and White

From the late '80s onward, there has been a renewed interest in black-and-white photography among art photographers. The ideas, reasons and processes behind these photographs are as varied as the photographers themselves. The common denominator, however, is that these works comment, whether consciously or not, on the position of large-scale color photography as seen in the contemporary art world over the last 25 years.

In 1988 Jeff Wall began commenting on color's relationship to black-and-white after discovering that his contemporaries, predominately, Craigie Horsfield, were making "innovative," non-color images on a larger-scale. Today, he considers black-and-white to be an integral part of his photographic practice, stating that it is "just a completion or expansion of what photography is." Assuming a Modernist point of view, Wall sees his black-and-white images as responding to the fundamental properties of the medium.

Wall's use of black-and-white photography is both ironic and momentous, but more importantly, it suggests that photographic practices have made their way around the proverbial art block. In other words, contemporary black-and-white photography references the formal elements of traditional photography while also incorporating the visual complexity, technology and vocabulary of conceptual and color art photography. For instance, Wall's *Passerby* is a wonderful example of a conceptual, black-and-white photograph that adopts the language of color photography. Theoretically speaking, each mode of photographic practice is borrowing from the other to create a new type of monochromatic image. This image is at the center of *After Color*.

The artists included in *After Color* use conceptual black-and-white photography to edify their conceptual practices. These practices include an investigation of form studies, mixed media constructions, photo-performance, and technological advancements in order to address ontological and epistemological concerns within photography. Similar to the Conceptualists of the '60s and '70s, such as Jan Dibbets, Joseph Kosuth and Sol Lewitt, the work in this exhibition allows for new interpretations of how non-color images exist in the contemporary art world. The work serves to redefine the potential of black-and-white photography while ushering in new developments in photographic discourse.

Unlike paintings, photographic prints are not necessarily unique. Their reproducibility is potentially infinite; a point that many art critics have used to claim that photography is a bastardized art form. A common theory is that because of the mechanical reproducibility of a serial work of art, the work possesses a depreciated level of value and authenticity. This is one of the fundamental theories being processed in Michael Bühler-Rose's latest body of work, *Open Edition*. Bühler-Rose investigates the concept of the editioned photograph. Each piece is a photogram of the word "edition" in which two numbers separated by a slash painted beneath the text in the same font and size, create a nearly seamless presentation. The composition and medium create a conceptual tension in the work. The resulting tensions cause one to question: which portion is the artwork and which is the label? Is it a painting with arbitrary numbers on a photograph, or numbers commenting on text? In function, the works in this series are both unique photographs and unique paintings. The artist's hand has altered the piece in such a way that it is no longer a reproducible photograph. Bühler-Rose's work raises the question: At what point does a piece become unique and at what point is it an edition?

In *Gradient Tool*, Talia Chetrit composes eight black-and-white prints from images created in Photoshop using the gradient tool. Once converted into digital 8 x 10 inch negatives, she returns

to the darkroom to make traditional contact prints on silver gelatin paper. The result is a formal study of tone and the way that light renders space.

Since its inception, artists have used Adobe's Photoshop to enhance images and articulate their ideas in numerous ways. Of late, photographers have used the popular software to assemble several photographs into a single image. This approach is evident in the work of Kelli Connell and Ben Gest. While not particularly critical of this method, it is important to note that Chetrit sidesteps this approach by employing Photoshop in a process that reverses technological advancements in photographic production. Taking into account that these works originate as digital fabrications and then revert to traditional silver gelatin prints, Chetrit raises the following questions: are these images actually photographs? Does referring to a traditional photographic process prove that this is photography? Furthermore, what does this work say about technology's continued influence on photography and how images are interpreted?

Chetrit's manipulation of the trajectory of technological advancements within photography work makes room for a critical discourse around the inherent contradictions within the medium of photography. Before images could be recorded through the photographic medium there were many less permanent and exact modes of record keeping and image making. One such device was the chalkboard. This is the subject of *None of the things it contemplates is present, except itself*, a series of photographs of excessively used chalkboards by Matthew Gamber.

Gamber's work employs one mode of technology in order to comment on another. A product of the industrial revolution, the chalkboard predates the first permanent photograph by almost 25 years, representing a technological advancement where written information could be recorded and broadcast to large audiences. Today, film works in a similar manner; that is to say, the information it contains (or is recorded) is used to produce a photograph, which is then used to visually communicate ideas to an audience. Film and the chalkboard are similar in that their usefulness is rooted in their ability to record and disseminate information.

The chalkboard's temporal limitations for holding information do not detract from its efficacy. Its main function is to be marked, erased and overwritten. Over time this function transforms the chalkboard into a monochromatic, abstract expressionistic painting. In looking at these pieces, one may recall *Concord*, an abstract painting by Barnett Newman. Comparable to Newman's painting, Gamber's photographs depict chalkboards that are embedded with white chalk residue, random lines, shapes and shades of grey. For a moment, these photographs pretend to be paintings, acting as if, like Newman's *Concord*, they never existed in the real world.

London-based photographer, Stephen Gill, has spent seven years of his photographic career exploring Hackney Wick, a borough situated in the northeast section of London. Hackney Wick has the largest number of betting establishments in England, maxing out at 120 (the average number in other London boroughs is 20). This phenomenon has profoundly impacted the residents of the community, who already struggle to improve their lives and shake off the town's negative gaming reputation.

There are several possible ways to approach photographing this community. One method would be to make portraits of people in the town, such as, the betting shop's staff, families impacted by gaming and the gamblers themselves, giving a face to the problem. One could also make photographs of an establishments' interior and exterior architecture, depicting how the institution functions and exists in the community. Looking past these conventional methods, Gill adopted a conceptual framework for this series. The result is over forty images of discarded betting slips taken from over seventy betting shops, and aptly titled, *A Series of Disappointments*. These typologies of

twisted, crumbled, torn and neatly folded betting slips, are formal studies of composition and shape, and act as metaphors for personal addiction, defeat and loss. This loss is further exemplified by Gill's choice to photograph these objects against a grey backdrop, adding a visual overcast that brings the viewer a step closer to the excitement that quickly ends in grief.

The titles of these works are as important as the work itself. Taking on the role of pathologist, Gill performs autopsies on the slips to uncover the failed bets held within, and then names the photographs accordingly, like, "Odal Diary 3, 25 to win." The discarded slips are revived by Gill's naming ritual. Through this process, Gill allows the betting slips to live on after being used and abandoned.

On an American road trip during the summer of 2007 French artist Adrien Missika visited Arizona, home to the über tourist magnet the Grand Canyon National Park. Awed by its beauty yet disappointed with its infrastructure and mass tourism, Missika photographed the canyon through the lens of a 25-cent telescope. These telescopes, positioned at sightseeing points allow tourists a magnified view of the canyon. The result is a project titled *Belvedere*, a series of four circular image details that present innovative ways of *photographic seeing* and demonstrate how the camera functions in the art making process.

Popular and widely recognized images of the Grand Canyon are often colorful and depict the vastness of the space. By employing the telescope and omitting color, Missika reduces the Grand Canyon to a floating landscape. These landscapes mimic small planets and contradict conventional landscape photography, which is often seen as sublime, unattainable and intimidating. This is not the case in *Belvedere*. The images are tangible, pocket-sized landscapes, better suited to entertain than educate.

In addition to providing a new perspective of the Grand Canyon, Missika also tinkers with photographic process. This is evident when you consider how the images have been produced. The circular Grand Canyon detail is a perspective that can only be captured by the telescope and not actually by the camera's lens. Missika takes the negative of the image normally used for traditional photographic printing and converts it into a negative made for screen-printing. Next, he uses white ink on black paper to make a Grand Canyon screen print. While not completely divorced from photography, Missika is using the camera more like a conceptualist and less like a photographer. In simpler terms, these images rely on the camera to record an idealized version of the Grand Canyon.

Indian artist, Pushpamala N, recreates images of South Indian women in art, history and popular culture. The artist often portrays the central character in the three projects: *The Native Types*, *The Ethnographic Series* and *The Popular Series* from the 2006 body of work titled *Native Women of South Indian: Manners and Customs*. *The Native Types* is regarded as the primary project, although derivatives, such as *The Popular Series* are equally significant, yet slightly different in scope.

The Native Types comprises ten photo-performance images in which the artist has recreated or remade ten existing images drawn from popular culture references, film, mythology, folklore and current events. Despite the meticulous detail the artist has undertaken, it would be inaccurate to consider these images merely copies of the originals. Rather, these images should be regarded as experiments that rely on competing ideas, memories and pictures to broaden our understanding of their context. One of the ten images from *The Native Types*, *Flirting*, is a recreated film still from a popular '90s Kannada film of the same name. *Flirting* is a color photograph that depicts a woman dressed in a traditional silk sari and a man wearing Western clothes. They stand close to each other in a small room. The woman, portrayed by Pushpamala N, innocently smiles at the man. The man reciprocates with a seductive stare as he hands her a red rose.

In *The Popular Series*, Pushpamala N has taken the ten archetypes established in *The Native Types* and sets them free to frolic and play in a variety of situations, settings and backgrounds, thereby further recontextualizing the images and their meanings. They wear sunglasses, ride motorcycles, talk on the phone and perform other activities that can be seen in the everyday. *Flirting*, an image in *The Popular Series*, explores a different, more playful version of itself. The cropping is tighter and the couple has switched sides, the man on the left, and the woman on the right. The man is much taller here, dominating the frame. Now the woman is holding the rose, but his hand gently holds her hand that holds the rose. He leans in, their eyes lock, we anticipate a kiss.

Pushpamala N considers and reconsiders context. With art, history and pop culture as her muses, originality and authenticity are stretched to great proportions. By incorporating a three-dimensional tableau and photo-performance in her work, Pushpamala N chips away at the history of representation of South Indian women.

The American landscape has been documented in various ways since the inception of the photographic medium. Arthur Ou follows this tradition in his project, *Untitled (Test Screens)*. In this series, Ou makes conventional yet striking seascapes. During the printing process, with the aid of a stencil, eyedropper or spray bottle, he adds bleach to the negative. These images are then printed at an almost life-sized scale at 51 x 40 inches. *Untitled (Test Screens)* aims to subvert the many clichés associated with photography. Landscape photography is often transparent. By adding bleach to the negative, Ou reduces the seascape to a two dimensional flat object. Seemingly random and spontaneous splatters of bleach obscure our perception of nature and challenge any notions about transparency in landscape photography.

Ou's artistic process also references traditional painting techniques. The act of applying bleach to a negative is similar to an artist painting a canvas. While the process is not nearly as laborious, it can be likened to Jackson Pollack's "drip" technique. Through this process and the use of black-and-white photography, Ou asks the viewer to reconsider representation in contemporary landscape photography.

In 1987 CompuServe introduced the Graphics Interchange Format (GIF). This 8-bit format allows a single image to reference a palette of up to 256 distinct colors chosen from the 24-bit RGB color space. It also supports animations and allows a separate palette of 256 colors for each frame. The GIF, specifically the low-fi animated GIF, is the basis of Noel Rodo-Vankeulen's project titled *Light, Shadow and Air*.

This series of animated GIFs transforms banal and often stilted images into a hypnotic and pulsating filmic experience. By working in black-and-white, the antithesis of the common 8-bit color GIFs made popular throughout the '90s, Rodo-Vankeulen makes room for fact to turn into fiction, allowing the animations to border on the mythic and the fantastical. Rooted in the structure of a photograph, these works are as much about what it is to look and how an image contains presence, as they are about the disposable experience of image and object. *Light, Shadow and Air* is an experiment in re-contextualizing medium specificity.

In 2006 Michael Vahrenwald began photographing doctor prescribed light boxes. People who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or "winter depression" use these devices when sufficient sun is not available. Appropriately titled *Winter Landscapes*, the ten works in this series are photographed on an 18% "photo gray" backdrop. Each photograph takes the name of the device depicted, *New Horizons*, for example. As photographs, the boxes themselves have a calming effect, allowing one to imagine their function as a depression remedy in the real world.

At first glance these light boxes appear to be commercial photographs. Upon additional

scrutiny, and after considering the works' content, they are better categorized as landscapes, albeit, medicinal, surrogate ones. With that said, the relationship between self and landscape could not be more pronounced. Man's attempts to tame, control and manipulate nature manifest itself in various ways. In this case, advancements in technology and science have made it possible to take the sun, seemingly static, and convert it into a dynamic version of itself.¹ The sun is now portable and available for sale.

Winter Landscapes explore the nature and function of pictures. Through black-and-white photography, these light boxes are reduced to flat objects, losing their magical properties. "When the user employs the device," writes Michael Bühler-Rose, "they are able to genuinely experience artificial sun through a substitute electronic source, the artificial thereby becoming very real. When the lamp is photographed, the experience disappears and we are left with just the symbol of the sun as a lamp."² *Winter Landscapes* raise questions about photography's truth content. What seemingly appears to be a commercial photograph of a light box is actually a landscape that is finally reduced to a man-made version of the sun.

The artists included in *After Color*, though varied in approach, are united by their ability to use black-and-white photography to challenge photographic conventions, re-contextualize ideas and play with process and technology. The sum of their efforts assists in expanding our notions of how non-color images function in the contemporary art world. Thinking about photography and pushing its boundaries in this manner allows for a unique viewing experience, new critical analysis and a platform for photographic practice to flourish. This exhibition does not intend to determine the future of black-and-white pictures and its relationship to contemporary art; rather, the premise is to give critical attention to the smart and dynamic ways that artists are working with black-and-white to articulate their ideas.

amani olu, Curator

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³Büher-Rose, Michael. Artist statement. 2009. Print.

⁴Chetrit, Talia. Artist statement. 2008. Print.

⁵"Chalkboard." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 24 Jun 2009

Web. 5 May 2009 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Chalkboard&oldid=298246292>>. "Photograph."

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⁶Croneman, John. "A Series of Disappointments." September 2008. Gun Gallery. Press release. Print.

⁷Arni, Clare and N, Pushpamala. "Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs." New York: Bose Pacia, 2006. Print.

⁸"Graphics Interchange Format." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 18 Jun 2009. Web. 5 May 2009

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Graphics_Interchange_Format&oldid=297225588>.

⁹Rodo-Vankeulen, Noel. Artist statement. 2009. Print.

¹⁰¹¹Bühler-Rose, Michael. "From Topographic to Geographic: The Landscape of the New World." MS Thesis University of Florida, 2008. Print.