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# Weekend

FINE ARTS  
LEISURE

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Photograph by

"Something More" (1989), above, by Tracey Moffatt and a detail from an untitled 1995 work by Tamara Grcić, below, from "The Promise of Photography," an exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary

## PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

## Gazing in a Mirror: The Omnipresent Car

# PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; Gazing in a Mirror: The Omnipresent Camera

By ROBERTA SMITH

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IN the age of mechanical reproduction, the hatred that dare not speak its name may well be photophobia. In these image-saturated times, even the most devout lovers of photography can succumb, while acute sufferers may even long for heated discussions of "the death of photography." After all, if other forms of human expression -- painting, sculpture, the novel -- are regularly pronounced dead, why is photography exempt?

Here, unfortunately, is why: Photography, you might say, is us. A century and a half after its invention, it is less a "form of human expression" than an inextricable part of the human condition and contemporary landscape, something involuntary and inescapable, almost like weather. It is no longer possible to catalogue its uses and applications, the fields of knowledge it has extended and the doors of experience it has opened, not to mention the thrilling tricks, illusions and visual manipulations it executes daily in magazines and newspapers and on billboards. At the moment the southeast corner of 26th Street and the Avenue of the Americas is dominated by the spectacle of a towering image of a well-shod young man scaling a brick wall that covers the side, also brick, of a 12-story building. It is an advertisement for shoes, but what dazzles is the giant figure, the blend of real and depicted brick and the way the building's actual windows become part of the image. Photography permeates the social fabric, the media and cyberspace, our very dreams. And it is the most omnipresent of all art forms.

Despite talk of the rise of video or the return of painting or the dominance of installation art, nothing in the last three decades of art can match the triumph of photography. Since the late 1960's, when it was put into play by Conceptual Art, photography has changed the history of art and infiltrated every other contemporary art medium while diversifying exponentially.

It has generated a sea change or two in art criticism and theory as well. And it has demonstrated that it is as capable as any other art medium of endless repetition and derivativeness, as suggested by the plethora of snapshots that, in various sizes, pass for art these days. An exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center offers some respite from the onslaught of photography that in the homeopathic tradition of treating like with like consists of more of the same. "The Promise of Photography: Selected Works From the

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DG Bank Collection" is a big, genial show of work dating from the early 1960's to the present. Its nearly 300 images by 32 artists are spread throughout the center's dozen ground-floor galleries with a sense of spaciousness and order that feels unusual by today's standards, when so many dense-packed photography installations seem bent on mimicking the medium's saturation of everyday life.

Selected from the DG Bank's enormous collection by Alanna Heiss, P.S. 1's director, and Klaus Biesenbach, one of its curators, "The Promise of Photography" seems like an attempt to clear the air quietly, to loosely yet seriously chart the extraordinary range of art photography without a hint of agenda, polemic or sensation.

In a purely experiential sense, air, or open space, is something that P.S. 1 has in quantity. There are rarely more than one or two artists to a gallery, and the blank walls provide perceptual intervals and pauses that enable each one's work to stand, or occasionally fall, in isolation, although there are plenty of connections and contrasts to be drawn if one is so inclined. The effect is marvelously unforced and unpredictable.

The works on view range from Marco Giacomelli's early 1960's black-and-white photographs of exuberant clerics on ice skates, their dark robes dramatically silhouetted against the snow, to Magdalena Jetelova's overly contrived images of dark Icelandic landscapes streaked with the white hot lines of a laser. In between, the show runs the gamut from artifice to document and back again. There are various kinds of street and landscape photography, work from several generations of Conceptually inclined artists (Dan Graham, Christian Boltanski, Dennis Adams, Candida Hofer) and sundry examples of set-up photography. The most notable of these is "Something More," Tracey Moffat's steamy Outback melodrama of death, desire and derailed travel plans, a tale told in nine images that combine over-the-top Technicolor with the silvers and grays of film noir.

The show is rife with the work of artists who have not had solo shows in New York; the mysterious portraits and landscapes of Bill Henson, who, like Ms. Moffat, is Australian, are a case in point. And there are several younger artists, both known and unknown, whose work reflects a new generation's embrace of the intuitive.

The German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans is represented by a wall scattered with his stylishly romantic images of his friends and surroundings. Nearby the sculptor Gabriel Orozco tactfully makes his presence felt with three color images that characteristically blend the exotic and banal. And across the way, the close-ups by the German artist Tamara Grcic zero in on the details, mostly green, of a grocery store in Chinatown in New York.

It makes perfect sense that these newcomers share a gallery with three color images from the 1970's by Helen Levitt, the great photographer of New York street life whose work has done so much to reveal the joys of the serendipitous encounter.

Ms. Heiss and Mr. Biesenbach seem to have deliberately avoided some of the most obvious usual suspects, skipping William Wegman, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff, even though the collection includes their work. And there are several surprises. Hanging opposite the charming Giacomelli images are a series of irresistibly antic images of Japanese children at play by Nobuyoshi Araki, best known in New York for voyeuristic, sexually charged scenes of scantily clad women. Considered against the background of Mr. Araki's other work, the innocence of his photographs at P.S. 1 is almost jarring.

There are also invigorating changes of pace. The walls of one gallery are covered with a single 109-image work from 1990 by the German Conceptualist Hanne Darboven. The

gallery holds one of the show's sweetest surprises, dopey self-portraits of Eva and Adele, the angelic German performance artists (a man and woman) known for a kind of double-cross cross-dressing. They always appear at international art openings dressed as identical female twins in bright vinyl suits and heavy powder, but confuse matters with their shaved heads. The images are accompanied by viewer mail.

The show often progresses in telling juxtapositions of sympathetic or contrasting sensibilities. In one of the early galleries, a photograph generated by the latest installment of Matthew Barney's "Cremaster" film series is a straight-on head shot of the artist as Gary Gilmore, grim, gritty and carefully staged.

Across the way are 12 images from Andy Warhol's "Social Disease," his offhand oddly caricature snapshots from the 1970's of the rich and famous and glamorous at play. They are, by the way, the only images of celebrities in the exhibition.

The German painters Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, longtime colleagues, take opposite walls, each represented by a small gallery with a small series of photographs that share a gray fuzziness and lackadaisical technique. Mr. Polke's double-exposed images of starlike sculptures fashioned from a folding ruler are from 1968 and brim with Post-Minimalist laissez-faire. Mr. Richter's shadowy images, from 1991, show the artist and others in a murky basement and exude some of the sinister, crime-scene ghostliness reminiscent of early works like his Bader-Meinhoff paintings, which were based on news photographs of the German terrorist group.

In another gallery, the straightforward photographs of William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, all from the 70's, cast the American South and the American West, respectively, in a glowing yet desolate light in scenes riddled with social inequity, economic decline and emotional isolation. Their genuineness is pointed up by one large image from the intractably cerebral Rodney Graham, of a tall and glorious ponderosa pine that is hung upside down. Fittingly, the image recreates the inversion of the human retina that makes all vision possible.

"The Promise of Photography: Selected Works From the DG Bank Collection" is at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Street, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 784-2084, through Oct. 24.

Photos: "Something More" (1989), above, by Tracey Moffatt and a detail from an untitled 1995 work by Tamara Grcic, below, from "The Promise of Photography," an exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center. (Photographs from P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center)(pg. E33); William Eggleston's "Sumner, Miss., Cassidy Bayou" (before 1975) is part of the exhibition "The Promise of Photography" at P.S. 1. Dan Graham's "House, Outside Pittsburgh," top, and "Neo-Colonial Garage, Westfield, N.J." (Photographs from P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center)(pg. E35)

**MARISA TOMEI**  
**CATHERINE**  
**KEENER**

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The next gallery presents two photographs by the German artist Katharina Sieverding: enormous X-ray-like images that show the human skull infused with clouds of liquid that suggest the imagination depicted at a rolling boil. A tiny alcove in one corner of this

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