

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Wandering in a Forest of Poses

By Roberta Smith

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PURCHASE, N.Y. - THE exhibition "Acting Out: Invented Melodrama in Contemporary Photography," which opens Sunday at the Neuberger Museum of Art on the campus of the State University of New York here, is a modest but focused effort that brings back old memories and differences. Specifically, it recalls a point in the early 1980's when Douglas Crimp, a pioneering art critic, lamented in an essay the growing popularity of postmodernism's cutting-edge strategy, appropriation.

Appropriation had begun only a few years earlier as a radical, primarily photographic practice introduced by artists like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince. As I remember it, Mr. Crimp's general complaint was that appropriation was raging out of control. Conceived as a way to "interrogate" the images that inundate and condition us, it had pretty much morphed into an academic, reactionary technique used by artists of all aesthetic stripes, political viewpoints and mediums.

Mr. Crimp's words had weight. "Pictures," the groundbreaking exhibition he curated at Artists Space in 1977, had been the first to identify appropriation. His catalog essay, revised to include Ms. Sherman (absent from the exhibition) and republished in October magazine in 1979, came to be among the most frequently cited essays on new art of the late 20th century. (It is cited once more in the "Acting Out" catalog.)

At the time, Mr. Crimp's assessment seemed accurate but his pessimism misplaced. (I chided him for his narrowness, in an admiring review of David Salle's appropriation-based paintings published in *The Village Voice*.) Today he

seems more right than ever, but by now appropriation has so thoroughly permeated culture -- high, low and middle -- that it is way beyond good or evil. It has become the house style of the world, pulverized and redefined on a regular basis by (to name but a few specialists) artists, musicians, movie directors, television writers, comedians and advertising hipsters everywhere.

"Acting Out" makes a finer point, if mostly inadvertently. It suggests that a more finite culprit from the early 1980's was not so much appropriation but a rather specific strand of it: staged or set-up photography using real people. Ms. Sherman first elaborated this strand in her staggeringly influential fictional "film stills" of the late 1970's, in which she cryptically evoked a full rotation of female movie stereotypes, and which became the springboard for her fruitful career.

Subsequent photographers have sometimes expanded the set-up genre to mural-size photographs that require as much as feature films in the way of sets, crews and preparation. This is where "Acting Out," which begins with examples of Ms. Sherman's medium-shaking film stills, finds itself.

The main, if seemingly unintended, achievement of this exhibition is simply this: It establishes that staged, people-based photography is becoming the Pre-Raphaelite painting of our time. The genre is overrun with images that are visually brittle, formally passive, intellectually obvious and steeped in sentimentality and feigned emotion.

"Acting Out" puts 33 works on view, mostly large color photographs by 13 fairly young artists from the United States, Israel and Europe. It originated at the University of Iowa Museum of Art in Iowa City, where it was organized by Kathleen A. Edwards, the museum's curator of prints, drawings, photographs and new media.

Ms. Edwards's essay is in some ways the most interesting part of the whole effort. Tracing notions about melodrama and visual storytelling to the 19th-century -- in history painting, the theater and early photography -- she touches on amusing hand-colored lobby cards of actors dressed like the three bears, for example. She also delves into phrenology, the implicitly racist, pseudo-scientific

study of the human face and skull for signs of intelligence and character. She quotes the movie director Douglas Sirk, a big influence in this realm, and alludes to the latest wrinkles in fashion photography.

The essay's main drawback is the lack of attention to the rise of set-up photography in early 1970's art (for example, work by Eleanor Antin, Mac Adams, Gilbert and George), which makes the essay feel as if it belongs to a different show. Yet it gives interesting background to subjects widely discussed since the original "Pictures" exhibition, namely the reflexive human need to attach meaning to photographs, to give them a logical "before" and plausible "after," and the tendency of most photographs to thwart such neatening-up, remaining essentially ambiguous.

Most of the images here play on the human instinct for narrative. Too few of them achieve an interesting ambiguity. The works on hand range from highly original to numbingly derivative; most are glaringly dependent on precedents from genre painting or other photographers, including some of those in the show.

Tom Hunter's photographs of people in interiors take almost all their cues from Dutch genre painting and Vermeer; one even includes a lute. But the titles -- "Woman Reading a Possession Order," "Girl Writing an Affidavit" -- add a jolt that feels forced and manipulative. Laura Letinsky's intimate images of couples seem like suburban versions of Nan Goldin's earlier images of alienated East Villagers.

Yinka Shonibare's sequence of 12 images show him playing the leading role in Oscar Wilde's "Picture of Dorian Gray," but the protagonist's change of race (Mr. Shonibare is black) doesn't bring a truly new dimension to the story. Simen Johan's mildly foreboding images of children (one is shown pulling a stuffed baboon on a wagon) seem all but generic.

Adi Nes's image of women gathering around a fallen youth is indebted to Gregory Crewdson's elaborately staged scenes. It is interesting primarily for its frozen Poussinian staginess, even though we are told it is inspired by a famous news photograph taken at Kent State. Luckily, Mr. Crewdson is represented here by earlier, smaller, less histrionic images than his current ones.

It is interesting to be reminded of the spare, modest casualness and the notably unmelodramatic blankness of Ms. Sherman's original film stills, which, like their source of inspiration, are small black-and-white images. Philip-Lorca diCorcia's four images, mostly from 1988, hover among snapshot, portrait and film still with a confounding richness.

In his "Madras," for example, what seems to be a child standing on a chair in a desolate room, looking at himself in a mirror, turns out to be, once you focus on his reflection, an extremely short man, possibly a midget, whose powerful face and slightly malevolent expression shade his isolation with tragedy and threat. But the man could also be an actor rehearsing a role in an abandoned dressing room.

Anna Gaskell is one of the few artists here to play formally with photographic space. Her closely cropped, claustrophobic images of preadolescent girls, mostly shrouded in sheets, have a creepy stillness that implies secret childhood rituals, or fairy tales. Justine Kurland's coming-of-age images place teenage girls in incongruously male environments -- shooting deer, gathering in an abandoned car -- and often contrast a grand but harsh natural setting with a subtle sense of human limitation.

Through no fault of its own, the show lost one of its heavyweights when Jeff Wall's "Pleading" did not make it to the Neuberger. Tina Barney provides unexpected Wall substitutes with "The Red Bathrobe" and "Sheena and Roy," images of couples, one peaceful and one quarreling, in noticeably unassuming surroundings. Both have a grittiness and emotional power that depart pleasantly from Ms. Barney's more characteristic portrayals of upper-class families at home.

"Acting Out" is like a stand of trees of a single species that by default makes you see the forest in a new way. It is so focused and specific, and also so visually monotonous, that the mind wanders to other artists and other issues. The formal sameness and seamlessness of the images -- their bright colors, contrived poses, signifying details, rational spatial illusions, predictable conundrums and frequent movielike finish -- may sharpen your appreciation of artists who work just outside its premise.

These are the postmodern photographers who build their images from scratch; rarely, if ever, use real people; and eschew melodrama. As a result, they have more formal and emotional options in terms of distortions of space, scale, artifice and nuance. Their numbers now span several generations, from James Casebere and Laurie Simmons to Thomas Demand, Oliver Boberg, Edwin Zwakman, Didier Massard and Sarah Anne Johnson.

In other words, while "Acting Out" may successfully pursue its stated subject, melodrama may be the least interesting aspect of set-up photography past and present. Like too many museum exhibitions of contemporary art, this one mistakes what is merely a bandwagon for a significant development, offering encouragement and validation when a moratorium might be more appropriate.

"Acting Out: Invented Melodrama in Contemporary Photography" opens Sunday at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, N.Y., (914)251-6000, and runs through Dec. 31.

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