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DIGITAL, ANALOG AND WATERLOGGED
'What is Photography?' Opens at the I.C.P

By Ken Johnson



Sigmar Polke's "Untitled (Mariette Althaus)," circa the early 1970s. Credit 2013 Estate of Sigmar Polke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

"What Is a Photograph?" asks the title of a disappointing exhibition at the International Center of Photography.

The show doesn't answer the question. Rather, it brings together works from the past four decades by 21 artists who have used photography to ponder photography, leaving viewers to figure it out for themselves.

A promising introductory wall text by the show's organizer, Carol Squiers, a curator at the center, says that these artists have engaged in "creative re-examinations of the art of analog photography, the ever-mutating world of the digital image and the hybrid creations of both systems as they flow together."

You might think you're in for a mind-blowing ride, but you're not. It's a strangely blinkered and backward-looking show. Nearly all the work on view has more to do with photography's past than with its possible future.

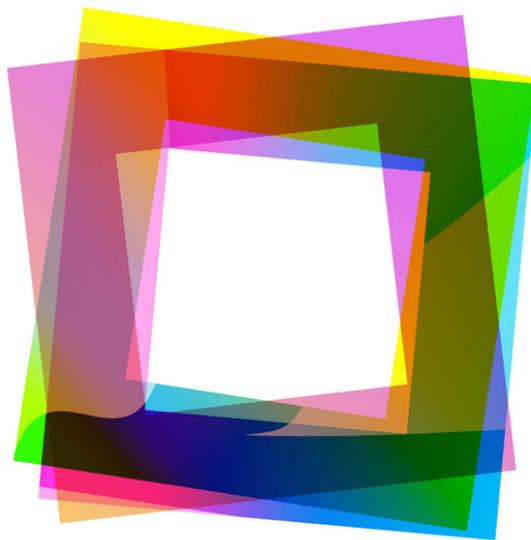
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Consider the punishingly sophisticated works in the show by two of today's most influential photographers, James Welling and Christopher Williams. One series by Mr. Welling is a meditation on Philip Johnson's Glass House, shot using colored filters. Another consists of rectangles of pure color, made in the darkroom using colored filters. For his part, Mr. Williams offers affectless collages consisting of pictures of vintage cameras clipped from old European photography magazines.

"Untitled (zoetrope)" by Liz Deschenes is also in an academic, retrospective vein. Its 13 vertical sheets of nearly black, semi-reflective photographic paper refer to the 19th-century optical novelty the zoetrope, an ancestor of 20th-century cinema.

David Benjamin Sherry makes large high-resolution landscape pictures that call to mind landscapes of the Old West by photographers from Timothy O'Sullivan to Ansel Adams. Each is tinted a single, slightly muted color, producing a dreamily memorial effect.

Several artists are committed to the processes and materials of the nearly obsolete darkroom. Alison Rossiter creates nostalgic abstractions by developing previously unexposed but long expired sheets of photographic paper. Marco Breuer scratches, burns, brushes and otherwise manipulates sheets of such paper to create pictures resembling Modernist abstract paintings.



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Mariah Robertson works in the dark on long rolls of photographic paper onto which she places objects, projects negatives and sprays chemical solutions. Hanging in loops from the ceiling and wall, her 100-foot-long piece called "154" offers a trippy, Rauschenberg-like stream of photographic consciousness.

Like Ms. Robertson, the photogram makers Adam Fuss and Floris Neusüss appear more concerned with artisanal resurrection of the old than with plumbing the new. So, too, Eileen Quinlan, whose suave, nearly abstract works hark back to early Modernist experimentation.

Another not urgently relevant approach is to treat the photograph as a physical object. So you have Gerhard Richter's prints smeared with paint; a tall mountainscape sandwiched lengthwise between two halves of a concrete column, by Letha Wilson; and deeply unoriginal sculptural assemblages of enlarged stock photographs, pieces of furniture and lighting fixtures, by Marlo Pascual.

With more ponderous calculation, Matthew Brandt submerges his large photographs of lakes and reservoirs in the actual waters depicted for long periods, causing the imagery to partially disintegrate. The final products resemble kitschy, post-apocalyptic illustrations and serve as metaphors for environmental degradation and the near extinction of analog photography.

Only four of the show's artists deal in digital technology. Travess Smalley makes Cubist-style collages that he electronically scans, manipulates on the computer and regurgitates as curiously bland, abstract prints. In different but related ways, Jon Rafman and Kate Steciw collect, alter and collage Internet imagery into generic Pop-Surrealist compositions.

The only artist in the show exploring new technologies of distribution is Artie Vierkant. He computer-generates '60s-style compositions of layered, translucent colored planes and prints them onto shaped panels. Though it's not exhibited here, Mr. Vierkant also uses his website to collect, alter and circulate documentary pictures of his own works produced by the galleries that exhibit them. Conceptually, if not visually, his project opens up the

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question of what photography is becoming more suggestively than anything else in the show.

For sheer visual satisfaction, however, nothing beats the works of Owen Kydd. They look like transparencies mounted on light boxes but are, in fact, high-resolution videos. One picturing a fancy silver knife in a storefront window appears to be a still photograph until you notice the reflections of passing cars moving across its surface. It's magical. But as a moving image, it belongs in a different exhibition.

Largely missing from the show is a sense of photography's effect on individual and collective consciousness. There are two exceptions. One is a selection from Lucas Samaras's series of small Polaroid self-portraits from the 1970s, in which he used pointed implements to alter images of his own naked body during the print's brief development time. The photographs marry the human subject and the technological apparatus to comically nightmarish effect.

The other is "Untitled (Here and Elsewhere)," a big collage by Sigmar Polke from 1977. It consists of about three dozen nondescript photographs of people in restaurants and one newspaper clipping featuring a photograph of the German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, a former Nazi Youth leader, and the business tycoon Ernst Wolf Mommsen, a former Nazi Party member, happily dining with others in a restaurant. Mr. Polke's point, Ms. Squiers explains in her catalog essay, was that "unsuspecting people" might be "sitting in bars and restaurants next to war criminals who were now not only respected citizens but members of the current government."

Mr. Polke's politically troublemaking collage points up the navel-gazing narrowness of almost everything else in the exhibition.