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PHOTOGRAPHY

DISPATCHES FROM THE BRINK

Houston's 13th FotoFest biennial trained a lens on contemporary photography in the U.S.

BY JEAN DYKSTRA

HOUSTON'S FOTOFEST, much like the city itself, is a sprawling affair. Every two years, the festival—founded in 1983 by photographers Wendy Watriss and Frederick Baldwin—takes over the cultural landscape for a month, with portfolio reviews, panels, workshops, curatorial forums and exhibitions. FotoFest organizes some of the shows; the rest are collateral events (this year around 100) mounted at miscellaneous venues. Given the large number of works on view—in spaces that ran the gamut from the Museum of Fine Arts and the Menil Collection to commercial galleries, nonprofits and artists' studios—the quality was bound to be uneven. The four principal exhibitions—selected this year by invited curators—showed contemporary photography from the United States. (Past FotoFest biennials have adopted such themes as China [2008], Water [2004], and Europe and Latin America [1992].) The exhibitions were thoughtful, coherent and far from cheerful; apparently, there is widespread wariness about where the country is headed and who is being left behind.

Covering some of the same ground in their respective shows, Aaron Schuman, an independent curator and founder of the online magazine *SeeSaw*, and Natasha Egan, deputy director of the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College in Chicago, addressed such broad concerns as the recession, war in the Middle East, and Americans' ongoing fascination with guns and cars. Edward Robinson and Sarah Bay Williams, from the photography department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, focused on Southern California con-



ceptual photography. Gilbert Vicario, curator at the Des Moines Art Center, selected recent examples of new media. Altogether, 45 artists were represented in these four shows, which were on view at different sites around Houston.

Much of the work was familiar to regular gallerygoers. The images in

Brian Ulrich: *Circuit City*, 2008, from the series "Dark Stores, Ghost Boxes and Dead Malls," 24 by 20 inches.

All works, unless otherwise noted, C-prints.

Brian Ulrich's series "Dark Stores, Ghost Boxes and Dead Malls" (2008-09), which was featured in Egan's exhibition "The Road to Nowhere" at the Winter Street Studios (a former furniture factory that houses artists' studios), include a shuttered Circuit City, its ghostly name just visible where the letters have been removed from the exterior, and the empty showroom of a Saks Fifth Avenue, all

once a grocery distribution warehouse. Schuman's starting point was the legacy of Walker Evans, and his choices drew stark parallels between the current economic downturn and the Great Depression. In a lyrical echo of Evans's pictures of sharecroppers' houses, for example, Todd Hido's foreclosed homes (1996) suggest the emptiness, literal and figurative, of financially ruined lives. In another vein, his

and down on the side of the road, calling out to passing cars and waving a hand-drawn sign advertising a junior class car wash. And for *Peeling Out* (2007), Stimac videotaped car after car burning rubber on dirt roads, suburban streets and highway entrances, an activity that becomes increasingly pointless and ridiculous as the footage wears on.

THE U.S. HAS BEEN at war in Afghanistan since 2001 and Iraq since 2003—long enough that these conflicts have become a familiar subject in art as well as journalistic photography. Thoughtful work by Richard Mosse explores different aspects of the wars and provocatively alludes to the history of photography. The video *Killcam* (2008), one of his more disturbing pieces, shows combat footage he found online in alternation with scenes of amputees at a VA hos-



mirrors and polished floors but no merchandise or mannequins. In Tim Davis's deceptively straightforward photographs from 2000, neon signs of fast-food joints are reflected in the windows of houses, as if to suggest the degree to which junk food and takeout have penetrated people's lives. Greta Pratt's "Liberty" (2009) is a new series of color portraits of people who are all suffering the same petty humiliation to make ends meet: dressed as the Statue of Liberty, they stand on various urban street corners advertising a company called Liberty Tax Service.

"Whatever Was Splendid," curated by Aaron Schuman, was on view at FotoFest's stylish headquarters at Vine Street Studios, a spacious brick building that was

more recent color series "A Road Divided" (2008-09) showed the flip side of America's love of road culture: shot through the windshield of his car, the muted pictures are of empty, lonesome-looking back roads. Several other participants addressed America's obsession with cars. RJ Shaughnessy backs into the subject in stark black-and-white photographs (2008-09) of bent fences and crooked street signs in Los Angeles that have been knocked over or pushed in by cars. Taken at night, in a harsh light, they look like crime-scene shots. More direct in approach are the videos of Greg Stimac, an artist chosen by both Schuman and Egan. In *Car Wash* (2006), a coyly flirtatious teenager in a short pink dress jumps up



Above, Greta Pratt: Alice Chatman, 2009, from the series "Liberty," pigment print, 49 by 30 inches.

Above left, Tim Davis: Dunkin' Donuts (Retail), 2001, 48 by 60 inches. Courtesy Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York.



Tower office building, where works were installed on the walls of a vast, echoing lobby. This show clearly was not about the perfect print: Matthew Brandt, for example, developed his photos in liquids that included lake water, breast milk and mucus. The title of Asha Shecker's series, "Assembly" (2009), refers both to a gathering of people—as in the New Age communities of his native Northern California—and

to the montage within the works themselves. Choosing from a personal archive—the fronts and backs of found snapshots, newspaper clippings and original photographs—Shacker shoots the ensembles as C-prints, but seems to suggest that other choices could have easily been made, other narratives just as readily constructed. For his series "Home" (2008), Matt Lipps cuts up reproductions of

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pital playing realistic, war-themed video games. In Mosse's large C-prints, American soldiers relax by a pool at one of the palaces of the former Iraqi regime—except that the pool is filled with rubble. *Pool at Uday's Palace* (2009) manages both to elicit sympathy for the soldiers and to arouse a distaste for American imperialism. Meanwhile, Mosse's sun-blasted photographs of bombed and bullet-riddled cars rusting in the desert (*Space Wagon Mosul*, 2009, for example) recall 19th-century photographs of archeological ruins.

The exhibition of Southern California conceptualists emphasized experimentation, introducing eight emerging photographers. Unfortunately, the presentation suffered from its venue, the Williams



Above, Richard Mosse: *Kilcarn*, 2008, video, approx. 50 minutes, Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Top Left, R.J. Shaughnessy: *Glendale Blvd. #1*, 2008, from the series "Your Golden Opportunity is Coming Very Soon," black-and-white photograph, 20 by 13 3/4 inches.

Left, Todd Hido: *#1213*, 1998, from the series "Foreclosed Homes," 24 by 20 inches, Courtesy Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco.



Matt Lipps:
Limited (bar), 2008, from
the series "Homo,"
C-print on aluminum,
36 by 48 inches.

iconic Ansel Adams landscapes and positions the cutouts in front of pictures of rooms in his childhood home that he has printed on sheets of colored paper. He then uses a 4x5 camera to photograph the assemblage on transparency film and prints the composites as C-prints. The precise black-and-white Adams images stand in sharp contrast to the rooms, which are both faded and arbitrarily colored. Referencing appropriation art, the dioramalike constructions are intentionally childlike, weaving photo history with Lipps's own memories.

Large color prints still abound in contemporary photography, but "Mediation," curated by Vicario and divided among three venues—the New World Museum, the Art League of Houston and the commercial and residential complex Isabella Court—highlighted artists doing more adventurous work, much of it concerned with language and information. A 2009 installation by Daniel Joseph

Martinez incorporates postcards that he mailed to Vicario from stops along the Alaskan pipeline, adding phrases and fragments of texts ("Timothy Treadwell is Alive," for example, referring to the subject of Werner Herzog's 2005 *Grizzly Man*, a bear enthusiast and filmmaker killed by the creatures he loved). Martinez positions each postcard text-forward on a stand in front of a mirror; the viewer sees the image only as a distorted reflection.

Emilio Chapela explores the way information is filtered by the Internet. His *According to Google* (2008) is a 40-volume series of clothbound books comprising page after page of single images derived from one-term Google searches: "Ugly," "1968," "9/11," "capitalism," etc. In the exhibition catalogue, Vicario calls it a representation of a "collective digital unconscious blindly attempting to express itself," a comment that not only suggests the apparently

infinite archive that is Google, but also Google's failure to provide meaning. Vicario's exhibition, at least, struck some playful notes, in contrast to the prevailing gloom in Houston. The Californians tend to turn inward, putting memory and personal iconography to good use, while embracing an elliptical and experimental approach to photography. ○

FotoFest was on view at multiple venues in Houston, Mar. 12-Apr. 25, 2010.

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