

NOVEMBER 1972-1980

# SOHO NEWS

## NEW WAVE PHOTOGRAPHY

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Frank Majore's In the Midnight Hour

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# (NEW) WAVE AT THE CAMERA?

Something is happening here, and I'm not sure what it is. Even Cindy Sherman, who selected the seven photographers for this group show at Artists Space (105 Hudson St., through Dec. 20) doesn't have a handy label to hang on it.

It certainly isn't in the art-photography tradition. It may come from Buffalo, as do most of the artists and Sherman herself, but I doubt it — it's too much tied in with attitudes visible elsewhere. In music it's called *new wave*. In painting you have your pick of "naïve nouveau," "primary imagery," "figurative disjunctivism" or "emblematic figuration." (Joan Simon's article "Double Takes" in October's *Art in America* neatly puts a finger on the common center of these "movements.") But even nameless, this exhibition marks a radical departure from the already tired conventions of photography-gallery photography. It's the most refreshing show of the year, possibly years.

Sherman's choices were made intuitively and her themes arrived at retroactively; she began with the simple notion of showing a few of her friends from Buffalo. Now she speaks of animation — a fabricated, Walt Disney sensibility — as an organizing motif. And she sees connections among the seven in their references to film and fashion, as well as in their fascination with romance and fiction-making. (All these attributes, not surprisingly, are true of Sherman's own photographs, in which she costumes herself to appear as the starlet in what look to be movie stills circa early Ann-Margret.)

Even at first glance these pictures have little in common with most of the photography we are accustomed to seeing in our "better" galleries. The color pictures emphasize cheap, synthetic hues of the most

noxious sort. Pat Place, for example, weds plastic color to plastic subject in her tacky still lifes of dinosaurs and dolls. Even if the only color is a background monochrome, as it is in Frank Majore's silhouetted friezes or Kevin Noble's gold-and-silver sprayed advertising appropriations, it is purposefully splashy and sassy.

Majore's and Noble's pictures also are characteristic of the exhibition's fascination with fashion and romance, as well as its reliance on a kind of aborted, proto-filmic narrative. Majore's 30 x 40 inch color prints, so dark they almost ask you to

stagey social interactions that are reminiscent of Nancy Dwyer's paintings. Because of the large scale (30 x 40 inches), simple maneuvers such as a kiss reach totemic proportions.

Another characteristic of the work is that it engages (or reengages) cultural clichés and stereotypes, inverting them so that their half emptiness seems half filled. Rene Santos' photo/text pieces combine sit-com style stills (I thought I saw Elinor Donahue from *Father Knows Best*, but no matter) with writing that is ironic, self-referential and otherwise characteristic of

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bring a flashlight, show single silhouetted figures making gestures we associate with comic strips like *Brenda Starr*. A woman kneels in supplication; a man stands sideways with his hands on his hips. Whether we are meant to make connections between separate frames is unclear, but the temptation is overwhelming. As with Sherman's pictures, we are left with a narrative of our own devising.

Noble's slick-surfaced panels reconstitute pictures lifted from magazines à la Richard Prince, but Noble intervenes in the process by emphasizing the rub marks from his transfer process. He focuses exclusively on heads of fashion-model types, refashioning them to create ambiguous,

contemporary fiction. Place's dinosaurs seem to have come out of childhood cereal boxes. Ken Pelka, in a series of wonderfully arch still lifes, fashions formally intelligent arrangements from garbage-bag ties, bubble wrap, plastic hangers and worse — all plopped on a wood floor painted silver and fuchsia. David Kulik's hilarious send-ups of photomicrography also employ disjunctive materials; in *Sperm sprouts fertilizing an egg (12,000 X)* the sprouts are bean, the egg is fried and the background is blue concrete.

While most take their cues from '50s pop culture — B movies, comics and TV — Brian Weil's work is referenced to a more recent cultural manifestation. His

huge black-and-white prints are enlarged from super-8 movie frames of staged pornography. The scratchy, grainy, high-contrast prints that result rest uneasily within their silver frames — art and life (here, lowlife) collide once again. The action is gruesome — fist-fucks, cock-sucks, whips and chains — but not frightening. Instead we face a horror vacui, violent subculture defused by art culture.

In one sense these photographs capture our attention by iconizing the trivial. That is to say, they are simultaneously suggestive and decorative, but they refuse to resolve (or even define) the putative "big issues" of life. Their emotions are contained; they remain nonjudgmental. They are even ironic about their irony.

In effect, then, such work removes the stigma of triviality from cultural raw material that has been considered kitsch, bad taste, humdrum and superficial. Something similar happened in the '60s when upstart pop art challenged the high seriousness of formalist painting. Crass commercialism invades art; art swallows it whole.

But the seven photographers here certainly are up to more than championing popular culture and ordinary life. They erect self-contained, self-generated and self-controlled arenas in which they can exercise their considerable talents for picture-making. In the process they question the judgments we customarily make about life and, by implication, about art. Their problem is a very modern one: that a world of fiction seems more dense than that of reality. Rene Santos locates this idea, the core of the exhibition as far as I'm concerned, when he writes (in a story about a story written by a certain Renee):

*You read on, becoming absorbed in the hazy allusions, the half-stated implications. You are still reading, fascinated by a fiction into which you try to weave some evidence of truth.*