

ART REVIEW

When Photography Became Postmodern

By ROBERTA SMITH

Over the last year or two, New York galleries have conducted a kind of ad hoc seminar in post-Pop photography. There have been shows of work from the 1960's and 70's by the photographers Stephen Shore, Bill Owens, Robert Adams, Henry Wessel and Joel Meyerowitz, and by the conceptual artists Jan Dibbets and Bernd and Hilla Becher. There have been shows of work from the late 1970's and 80's by the appropriation artists Laurie Simmons and Richard Prince as well as an exhibition of little-known photographic books by artists from the early 1970's at Roth Horowitz.

"Pictures" at an Exhibition," at Artists Space in SoHo, could be considered the seminar's final session, a dry but illuminating return to the late 1970's and a moment when art was on the cusp between modern and postmodern. The show is a fragmentary re-creation of "Pictures," an influential show organized by the

"Pictures" at an Exhibition" remains at Artists Space, 38 Greene Street, SoHo, (212) 226-3970, through July 14.

critic Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in 1977, when it was on Hudson Street in TriBeCa and, in a bit of dot-com prescience, still ran its name together into one word.

The current show is the parting effort of Jenelle Porter, a curator at Artists Space who recently moved to Los Angeles. She has managed to pull together just enough of the works that were in the original show to give a sense of what its five artists — Troy Brautuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith — were up to. Their efforts are displayed here with installation shots of the original show, as well as its news release and catalog and the reviews of it.

Mr. Crimp's show was one of the first signs of a generation of young artists who were soon called Pictures or appropriation artists and finally postmodern artists. They worked with the camera, but didn't consider themselves photographers and also rejected the photo-text combination prevalent in Conceptual Art. They used the camera against itself, photographing or simulating existing images as a way of examining the pervasiveness and social role of photographs.

They worked with images that the mind not only already knows, to



A still from "Shane," a three-minute film by Jack Goldstein from 1975.

paraphrase Jasper Johns, but also reflexively reads, imbuing them with multiple meanings. (In a sense, texts were superfluous.)

For example, Mr. Longo's forthrightly ambiguous "American Soldier or the Quiet Schoolboy," a small painted aluminum relief of a man in slacks, shirtsleeves and a hat, who seems to be twisting in the air, was especially emblematic of the period,

as was the debate about whether the figure was doing a suave dance step or being shot in the back.

Today after two decades of rampant, pluralist appropriation in every medium, nearly everything in "Pictures" looks wan and mute, especially Mr. Brautuch's grainy, slightly sinister images of World War II tanks and the flags at a Nazi rally in Nuremberg printed on expanses of

red paper, or Ms. Levine's stenciled profiles of American presidents. What's more interesting are the words that swirled around them. In a manifesto-like tone that seems more modernist than postmodern, the news release announces "a new sensibility almost wholly unknown," while carefully quarantining the show's artists from the widespread use of existing images or the "return of representational painting." It says, "Only a limited number of young artists have approached the image with the intense clarity that signals a new direction."

In addition, the show may have been a bit ahead of itself. Most of the artists here would go on to do stronger work. And many of those who have worked most fruitfully with appropriation — including Ms. Simmons, Mr. Prince, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, James Welling, James Casebere and especially Cindy Sherman — were not quite near enough to the surface to be discovered. In fact, when Mr. Crimp reworked his catalog essay in 1979 for publication in October magazine, he eliminated Mr. Smith and added Ms. Sherman.

The "Pictures" works that live up to the writing about them most impressively and that encapsulate the potential of appropriation most clearly and complexly are Mr. Goldstein's short films and vinyl records. It also doesn't hurt that they are extremely germane to a moment when so many video and installation artists are recycling, sampling and simulating both the images and soundtracks of film and television.

In one of his best-known works, Mr. Goldstein makes the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion roar again and again until it looks like a windup toy in another, he enhances the repeated images of men diving from invisible diving boards so that they resemble garish lighted motel signs and splinter violently.

In a third, he parodies Hollywood fanfare by gradually illuminating a plain dinner knife with red, then blue, then yellow light (you can almost hear a drumroll); and in "Feathers," he sends up modernist abstraction by dropping one brightly colored feather at a time onto a barely discernible gleaming black chair. In the earliest film, from 1975, a hand holding a pencil traces over an image of van Gogh's portrait of the grandfatherly art dealer Pere Tanguy, shown seated before a wall covered with Japanese prints that van Gogh copied into the painting. The records include stock movie sound-effects of cats fighting, trains passing and, more intensely, someone drowning.

The Tanguy portrait suggests to some extent that appropriation has been around for quite a while, just as the exhibition at Roth Horowitz last spring revealed that photographic appropriation was actually widespread in several parts of the world in the early 1970's and even the late 60's. But the original "Pictures" articulated a new awareness of the deluge of images surrounding us, even if it has paled beside the deluge of appropriation art since then.