



Redefining Contemporary Photography: A Look at Photographic Exhibitions Around Houston

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Houston is recognized as a city with an avid market for the appreciation of photography. Two major photographic resources established in the early eighties—FotoFest and Houston Center for Photography—have been contributing to this city's photographic heritage for over 20 years. Since its inception in 1983, FotoFest has been vital to the development of a strong local market for photography as well as responsible for opening Houston's doors to an international discourse within the field. Every two years, the city's photographers, artists, collectors, and critics enjoy the benefits of a tremendous exchange of ideas and photographic projects that contribute to a dynamic contemporary art practice as well as to the ever-changing definition of photography.

The exposure to the ideas and methodologies of others serves to establish a dialogue, which in turn nurtures creativity. An exhibition worth visiting is *FOTO: New Photography from Denmark*, which is on view at FotoFest Headquarters in Vine Street Studios through March 10. The show presents work by a vast selection of Danish artists who have been at the forefront of creating stimulating photographic work. Many of the artists explore new ways of applying classical techniques, resulting in compelling works that offer a fresh perspective.

In recent conversations with friends and colleagues the question of what defines "contemporary photography" has been subject to many debates and deliberations. It is certainly a tricky subject

to approach from a clear-cut standpoint. To delineate and classify the current and future tendencies in photography seems like an arduous task to embark on. Technology is constantly affecting the photographic medium, and artists are continuously challenging its boundaries as they experiment within a broader artistic practice. I thus decided to continue the conversation with Madeline Yale, Interim Executive Director/Program Director at the Houston Center for Photography. In her opinion, "photography is indexical—both the subject and the tangible object cannot be divorced from culture and economics. In that light,

photography evolves at the same pace as society, which is now progressing at an exponentially rapid rate. In the last 10 years, the development of the photographic image happens less and less in the darkroom setting as digital methods become more economical and popular. The once widely used gelatin silver print process is becoming alternative, as materials are no longer readily available. Cultural signatures in photographic style and composition are recently less evident, as images are easily exchanged via the internet and mobile phones, and diffusing national boundaries increase our exposure to all kinds of photographic methodologies."

From February 23 to April 15, the Houston Center for Photography presents *6-Pack*, an exhibition that brings together the work of six emerging photographers from Mexico City; Victor Mendiola, Adrian Aguirre, Dante Busquets, Omar Gamez, Enrique Greenwell, and Benjamin Alcantara. The show,



LEFT TOP: Adrian Aguirre, From the series *La Muerte de Narciso*

LEFT BOTTOM: Ariane Roesch,

BELOW: Atila, Untitled (Lisbon), 1990

which explores the city and its environments as well as the boundaries of photographic truth, promises to have something for everyone.

There is a widespread opinion among photography experts and curators that for a work to be considered or defined as a photographic work, the only requisite would be that it presents the use of the image in some way. By image, I do not necessarily mean a traditional photographic image taken with a camera. The definition of image in this case is as open as that of photography itself, incorporating anything from the traditional photograph to appropriated images of any sort to digital images created purely with computer software. Without doubt, the boundaries of the photographic medium continue to be investigated, stretched, and redefined. Of course, there will always be those purists who consider photography as only those images created with or through the use of a camera. It is true that the act of pointing a lens in one direction, cropping a view, and pressing "click" to capture a specific moment in time is the most romantic view of photography. Notwithstanding, it is worth noting that works such as digital images that originate predominantly in the computer or collages of appropriated images, still reflect the act of creating an overall image through a selection process of choosing what pieces of information to include or not. There have been cases in which such works border between photography and painting, where the artist is using a digital medium to create a work of art as if h/she were using paint and a brush on canvas. If the artist chooses to capture this digital "painting" on photographic paper, then the propensity for an audience to receive and classify the work as a photograph increases.

In congruence with this discussion, on February 3rd, the De Santos Gallery opened an exciting exhibition to showcase recent photo-based work of young artists Andrew Taylor and Ariane Roesch. The show aimed to redefine the boundaries for creating art through the use of the photographic medium and commented on the current role that photography plays in the world of contemporary art. The work is fresh and genuinely captivating, and most intriguing was the understated dialogue between the two artists. As Gemma De Santos, owner of the De Santos Gallery, articulates, "what joins Roesch's and Taylor's work together is that both artists use appropriated images to express their creativity and to create their art." In most cases, Roesch takes old family photographs and constructs a new work of art by incorporating thread into the image. This embroidery, or collage of bundles of thread, adds a three-dimensional aspect to the work. Taylor, on the other hand, turns to old family portraits and



recreates a new variation of the old image using a digital medium. His printing technique opens the work to the possibility of being categorized as printmaking.

The idea of separating art into categories and sub-categories attempting to define a certain type of art in a straightforward manner has been the foundation of western history of art. In more recent years, however, this segmented view of art has been more problematic than before. Contemporary art is at a point where many works don't fit into just one category. It is not unusual for someone to walk into a gallery today and think: "How should I interpret this? Is this work more of a photograph or more of a sculpture, or does its process better relate to the process of painting?"

What I found most inspiring from the show at De Santos Gallery is that although I was encountering the work within the context of a fine art photography gallery, Roesch's work could rightly be characterized as assemblage or installation art. Although the image is an integral part of her work, it's sculptural and textural qualities invite the viewer to study the relationship between the image and the other materials she uses,

such as string or wire. Taylor uses a complex mix of printmaking, collage, digital media, and photography to create works that captivate the viewer and challenge our pre-conceived idea of photography. At their core, both Roesch's and Taylor's work are layered with complex social issues. However, one can simply admire the intricacy of their creation processes. The combination of media and techniques they each use is what makes the work so fascinating. In his large-scale pieces, Taylor re-contextualizes the borrowed images, and creates new narratives that challenge our habitual socio-cultural constructs. Each image is recreated digitally and then hand-printed in segments by transferring pigmented ink from an inkjet printer onto watercolor paper. His process is laborious and repetitive. In a similar fashion, Roesch uses a needle and thread to repeat a pattern across her chosen image. The wire or thread in her work indicate notions of connectivity, and explore the relationship between man and technology.

On March 10, the De Santos Gallery will open a show for contemporary photographer Bill Armstrong. The work is yet another set of non-traditional, abstract images taken of collages that Armstrong creates from different colored papers. In conversation with Gemma de Santos she asserted, "The interest of the gallery is to showcase works that demonstrate all aspects and possibilities of photography."