

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents



Slipping from Grasp: The Photographs of John Brill

by Thomas Micchelli on December 5, 2015

Memories, in John Brill's work, are things — photographs, often grainy and myopic, enshrined in everyday reliquaries: vintage frames, candy dishes, glass bowls, teacups and saucers. Nostalgia is the lure — the madeleine of antique dressers crammed with knickknacks and family photos — and the imagery, which becomes squirmier and more incomprehensible the closer you look, is the trap.

The artist's untitled installation is tucked into a back room of Kent Fine Art in Chelsea, across a wall-sized bookshelf where catalogues of gallery artists usually reside. Most of the shelves hold a multiplicity of objects, but the top center compartment is dominated by a single item, a black-framed cyanotype on thin, wrinkled paper of what could be a UFO or, more likely, a fuzzy, oversized All-Seeing Eye, like the Masonic symbol that stares out from the back of the dollar bill.

Either way, emerging as it does from the pale, metallic blues of the ancient (for photography) cyanotype process, it hovers in the center of the distressed paper as if materializing out of the sky, a patriarchal, cyclopean superego. The starkness of this isolated object resets our reception of the rest of the installation, which may at first blush evoke a cluttered Kienholz assemblage of homeyness and horror, but a second, closer look reveals that the project, despite a few old-fashioned lampshades here and there, is a disciplined, understated and streamlined presentation of a particular vision of photography, comprising a set of barely discernible images conjured from a range of materials-based media, from Polaroids to bleached-out darkroom prints to transparencies.

Many of the compartments contain only photographs,

some framed and some not. Where extraneous objects appear, they are almost invariably made of glass or porcelain, and often arranged with a classicizing symmetry. The tension between the photograph's murky, quirky expressionism and the clear-eyed installation is sharp and exhilarating. Brill's disquieting, frequently grotesque images (faces, babies, flames, shadows, apes, even a zebra), many of them mounted in standing frames like family portraits, are juxtaposed in groupings that parse the meaning of human against its various prefixes: non-human, subhuman, inhuman.

In a catalogue of the artist's work, published by Kent in 2002, the art historian and critic Leah Ollman wrote, "It was once believed that memory corresponded to the amount of light and dark in the body." The dark and light in Brill's photographs are wrought from a low-tech, physical engagement in the darkroom, where he suffuses the prints with bleach and toner to achieve his more ethereal effects, a practice more in line with painting than with most contemporary photography and its prevailing digital discourse.

The bodily element, manifested in literal terms by his manipulation of the paper, pigment and solvent, is also evidenced in the blunt, visceral charge of the images. The gestalt of these apparitions eschew Manichean dichotomies of darkness and light, good and evil; rather, light and dark alternately blind and obscure — the more we reach for legibility, as for the flicker of a memory, the more it slips from our grasp.

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There's an anomalous object sitting on a shelf among the photos, frames, and glass and porcelain vessels: the bleached-white shell of a horseshoe crab, one of the most ancient species on earth, whose primitive anatomy feels of a piece with the monstrously beautiful life forms inhabiting the installation.

The duality at work in Brill's art — the self-awareness and control embedded in the photographic process in contrast to the blurred unknowability of his images — expose the carapace beneath our cultured façades, the brutish shell in which we enclose ourselves, sightless and adrift.

PROJECT: John Brill will continue at Kent Fine Art (Kent Fine Art (210 Eleventh Avenue, 2nd floor, between 24th & 25th Streets, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 23.

