

SHANNON

Works by: Marzena Abrahamik, Endia Beal, Elizabeth Bick, Johanna Case-Hofmeister, Tommy Kha, Michael Marcelle, Sophie Ruspoli, Justin Schmitz, Sadie Wechler, Rick Yribe

The 2013 graduates of the Yale University MFA program in photography have assembled a group exhibition of their thesis work, as every class has done since 2006. Presented at Johalla Projects in Chicago and Aperture Gallery in New York City, the show marks the culmination of their studies and complements their individual theses, which were presented at Yale's Green Gallery earlier this year. Unlike preceding classes, this cohort decided to organize their public-facing show in an unconventional installation with photographs by all ten participating artists intermixed throughout the gallery, devoid of wall labels and with very little identifying information about the background of the work or the people who made it. This is a bold decision. It bucks what has become one of the principal objectives of the thesis show for young artists: the use of a group showcase to launch individual artists through separate, cohesive, and original bodies of work, with the hope that collectors and institutions will notice and nourish their artistic practice going forward. The prevailing format of a final thesis show can be practical in terms of creating a spectacle for debuting young talent, but it's often awkward in execution, as even the most moving works can be colored by the plethora of voices and artistic approaches that are divided across a single gallery.

In contrast, *Shannon* offers a vivid and all-encompassing experience that takes the group show itself as its *raison d'être* rather than a presentation of discrete projects. Splicing together diverse methods of picture making, the installation makes incidental connections that bring new and often unexpected meanings to pictures that were all originally conceived as unrelated art projects. The images traverse private and public spaces—moving through urban streets, office buildings, concert venues, landscape scenes, bedrooms, and other locales—and freely mix photography's capacity for highly detailed description with its alchemistic and abstract potential. By integrating these varied approaches, the graduates explore themes and questions specific to their generation's open-ended use of the photographic medium. They probe the extent to which an artist can or should draw boundaries around the context of their own artwork at a time when image proliferation continues to explode and morph. They question where and how to separate one's individual thoughts from those of a community or a collective and champion a cooperative synergy that falls somewhere between the singular artist and a collaborative team. Ultimately, they celebrate photography itself as a slippery and paradoxical medium that projects meaning even as it absorbs it from its surroundings. The show also reminds us that the medium's most elusive qualities are perhaps also its most evocative.

The title *Shannon* is, like the show itself, oblique. It alludes to a person whose gender, age, race, and involvement in the project are ambiguous. The participating artists chose the title as a way to name and personify the dynamism of their shared experiences, which stand alongside each person's individual sense of graduate school. Steeped in the premise that photography is a drifting medium that continues to have new and unexplained fissures for exploration and discovery, the name and the exhibition place the shape-shifting power of context as a central inquiry in contemporary art photography. At the same time *Shannon* suggests that it is not simply the photograph whose meaning is unfixed, but also the perception of both the maker and the viewer. A milieu of information, changing and unmappable, encircles us all.

Allison Grant