

Text for the exhibition:

Hic et Nunc_(Here and Now) A Survey Of New Guard Photography

The Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chicago, IL

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“At the turn of the millennium, Chicago photography emerged from its relative doldrums and took on new energy and focus, as a generation of students in Columbia College's photo program struck out in their own directions that nonetheless evinced a distinctive and coherent thematic tendency. Eschewing the postmodern perspectives of the recent additions to the program's faculty and the traditional approaches of the old timers, the rising generation revived the social documentary that had once been Columbia's staple, adding elements of contemporary cultural criticism and resulting in fresh bodies of work that took a wry and sometimes mordant, yet playful look at the life going down around them.

The young photographers nurtured one another and formed a genuine community, which stimulated their creativity and gave them confidence to break the molds that had been prepared for them. Their mutual support paved the way for some of them to gain a foothold in the art world after they graduated, which is a rare feat in an intensely competitive Darwinian scene in which budding photographers far outnumber the places that open up for them in the art establishment.

Four of the members of that privileged generation, who have gained recognition far beyond Chicago, are represented in "Hic et Nunc." Nathan Baker, Jon Gitelson, Jason Lazarus and Brian Ulrich have achieved gallery representation, shown in museums and sold their work, and they have not compromised their original visions; rather, they have enhanced their skills and honed their sensibilities. They have remained friends, which is also rare.

The most focussed of the group, Ulrich, has spent his years since graduation on an ambitious project of documenting American consumerism through successive series showing shoppers loading their booty into their cars in big-box parking lots, patrons wandering glazed-eyed through the aisles of those stores, the jumbles of discarded baubles in thrift shops and the messes in the back rooms of a showroom, and most recently derelict malls - the victims of recession. The two images of signage in "Hic et Nunc" admirably depict Ulrich's ironic take on the shopper's world that combines an underlying critical current and a sense of the absurd.

Whereas Ulrich's approach is decidedly public, Lazarus has often made himself the object of the lens, although always with a purpose beyond self-study. His most exciting work has mined the genre of performance photography, as in images in which he prepares to set fire to the Museum of Contemporary Art or sprawls on his belly on a showroom floor as he obscures his face with a portrait of Marilyn Monroe. The images that Lazarus has chosen to present here emphasize a more existential and absurdist, yet poignant side of his complex sensibility.

Gitelson is the most playful of the pack, although he has a broad humanist streak. One of his most successful series depicts his car, which is parked outside night clubs and festooned from top to bottom with flyers advertising those venues. Another series, gracing the Brown Line station at Armitage and Sheffield, is a moving set of documents showing Chicago places that were of particular importance to strangers whom Gitelson interviewed, accompanied by excerpts from their stories. The staring contest that Gitelson offers in "Hic et Nunc" highlights his playful side.

Combining a troubled existential awareness with an insistent social conscience, Baker produced a stunning series in which he digitally collaged shots of single workers at their daily tasks into seamless images that bring home the complexities and dignity of blue-collar and pink-collar jobs. His images in "Hic et Nunc" return to an earlier passion to capture visually the dynamic sense of rock-music performance, now with karaoke singers as his subjects.

As different as they are, the emerging photographers here share an interest in the world around them that transcends concern with and for themselves or their families and friends. They do not pretend to be coolly objective and detached - their sensibilities and values are projected into their work - but they are not concerned primarily with their private lives; they are cultural and social photographers, which goes a long way to explaining their success in the wider world.

The picture changes when we look at the new cohort of photographers here, who have just graduated from art school and have not had the opportunity to develop their visions independent of tutelage. Like their forbears, Claudia Burns, the team of Terttu Uibopuu and Sarah Mckemie, Sean Fader, Aron Gent, Mandukhai Kaylin and Tealia Ellis Ritter, follow their own stars, yet as a group their focus is dispersed and they tend toward a private rather than a public emphasis.

The difference is best exemplified by comparing Lazarus to Kaylin. Both of them practice performance photography, but whereas Lazarus makes himself a point man for cultural criticism, Kaylin invades the homes of strangers and shoots

herself exploring them with the express intent of experiencing "the vicarious fulfillment of private desires." A similar projection of desire informs Fader's images, in which he vogues in private spaces wearing a bikini bottom or shorts. Both Kaylin's and Fader's images have a measure of wit, but they are self-referential and, in the end, self-celebratory.

An opposite path - just as personal, but more tentative and distancing - is followed by Gent's studies of interiors and Burns's images and bathers and a boater shot from afar. Both Gent and Burns realize poignant effects that result from the viewer's inability to connect with their subjects - a form of what Nietzsche called the "pathos of distance."

A third way - the most provocative - is followed by Uibopuu/Mckemie and Ritter, all of whom express a sense of despondency and exhaustion that Ritter calls "waning life" and Uibopuu dubs "subtopia." For Ritter it is a dead stag paired with an old woman; for Uibopuu/Mckemie, it is a figure slumped over a table and a constrained young woman seated sideways on a chair being forced or forcing herself to "concentrate."

Artists respond to their circumstances. If the two cohorts of Chicago photographers are any indication, the world has become a lot more unfriendly and oppressive to youth than it was just a few years ago."