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Sheree Hovsepian: Contact
Hunter Braithwaite

AUG 2011

The photographic moment is surely one of both reduction and addition. Reduction in the way existence is cropped, depth is replaced by the illusion of such, and so on. Addition, in the continual replication of the moment, interpretation, and levels of seeing. For "Contact" at the Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Sheree Hovsepian presents a tightly edited body of photographs that engage this frustrating duality and also complicates the medium's heritage, pulling from the seemingly disparate stacks of Surrealism, Constructivism, and the New York School.

Contact, of course, alludes to the contact sheet, but also to the series of inheritances that construct the contemporary photographic practice. To be clear, the pictures in "Contact" are innovative, yet insurmountably linked to the past. This lineage is less clear because of her practice's non-objectivity; however, by its nature photography is nonobjective. While it creates a flawlessly mimetic print, the camera, as a box that catches light, knows little about Saussurean semiotics and thus presents a picture that is pure formalism, light and dark, devoid of any content or narrative. Rather than abstract forms found in nature, as was in vogue during the early days of experimental photography, Hovsepian creates her work in the studio. In this, the realm of the photographer (long seen as the wandering critic of the city streets) shrinks to that of the solipsistic easel painter, an interesting response to digital photography's omnipresence. The artist also defies present trends by banishing the digital. All of these pictures were created using traditional printing techniques and with no postproduction work.

The most straightforward images have a classical feel, linking them to the dawn of perception. Against a black void, the human presence remains. A vase reflected in a mirror has the Willendorfian curves of one of Edward Weston's bell peppers. A slivered parabola recalls a passing eclipse. Both of these photographs are strongly rooted in Surrealism, both in the uncanny subject matter and how they probe into the recesses of consciousness. Interestingly, it seems that the more reduced the compositions are, the more universally evocative they become—as if they're rooted in prehistoric imagebank.

A second Untitled series deconstructs the photographic plane with minimalist geometric compositions and an additional sculptural element. In two, Hovsepian looped string around several copper nails, creating a web that echoes the rhythm of the exposure. In the other, she marred a rigorously formal photograph with a thick smear of graphite powder. This violent intrusion into the world of cool minimalism reveals the tension between the photographic image, usually seen divorced from the process that formed it, and the photographer's presence. It also relishes in the brutal materiality of earthworks, a school primarily dependent upon photography to document it. Fittingly, the circle of graphite closely resembles one of Richard Serra's drawings.

The most successful photographs are the "Sleight of Hand" series. In these, Hovsepian photographed a piece of colored paper against a wall, moved it, and then made another exposure. This process disregards crispness for a lush, vibrating density of color that increasingly disintegrates into overexposure. One sees the trail of the artist's hand. In this, and in the minimal compositions of simple forms, exists the lineage of mid-century painting. Hovsepian also includes the studio floor in the composition. Not only does this rupture the hermetic composition, it allows for the inclusion of the process of making the photograph. Think of Pollock painting on the floor, and Hans Namuth's equally iconic photographic documentation. The "Sleight of Hand" series manages to capture a time and place, thus blending documentary photography with nonobjective formalism.

The question behind "Contact" is one of heritage. Once photography is emptied of content, what does the form relate to? Since photographs create an optical map, both to real world content and to other photos that they resemble, the obvious answer would be the visual rhythms of earlier artists, regardless of their chosen medium. As to the molting of content, it makes sense that photographers would retreat from the city street. Much of the decisive moments serendipitously captured by Cartier-Bresson (and Lartigue, Friedlander, and Klein, and...) are now the realm of the pervasive amateur. If subject matter belongs to Flickr, then formalism must retreat to the studio.

"Contact" was on view at Charest-Weinberg Gallery from June 24-August 20.