

Art in America

OCTOBER 1998

Judy Pfaff

3 French
Abstractionists

Richard Diebenkorn

Report from
Budapest



\$5.00 USA

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Art in America

October 1998

Judy Pfaff: *Life and Limb* by Nancy Princenthal

Currently representing the U.S. at the São Paulo Biennial, the artist has utilized sections of massive trees in her recent installations.

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Richard Diebenkorn: *A Reasoned Sensuality* by Stephen Westfall

A traveling retrospective presents the abstractions, landscapes and figurative paintings of a leading West Coast modernist.

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A History Lesson by Diane Shamash

Two related exhibitions recently featured Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler's collaborations in art and music.

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Abstraction à la française by Raphael Rubinstein

Three French painters—Noël Dolla, Bernard Frize and Bernard Piffaretti—update the tradition of modernist abstraction.

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Freeze the Moment by Anne Rochette and Wade Saunders

The mechanical sculptures of the late French artist Richard Baqué evoke the lure of travel and the mystery of language.

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Animal, Vegetable, Mystical by Vincent Katz

In Hunt Slonem's paintings, densely layered images emerge from turbulent brushwork and flurries of color.

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The Audit Bureau



Chris Verene: *Camera Club 13*, 1995-97, Chromogenic print, 24 by 20 inches; at Paul Morris.

two river vistas, for example, are identical except that the one on the right is bisected by a wide, bright red vertical stripe. At first it appears to be an anomaly, like an errant Barnett Newman zip that has wandered onto the picture plane. Only when you get up close can you see that it is not painted on top but actually part of the photo, a red metal standard possibly for a fire-alarm box. Here, Barth contrasts sharp focus to blur; we can see every blob and scratch on the red surface.

Barth is exploring ways to overcome photography's natural emphasis on subject in order to concentrate on color, light and form. It's interesting to compare her work with that of Gerhard Richter, who chooses similar images for their neutrality of content; but where Richter blurs painting to make it look like photography, Barth blurs photography to make it look like painting. —Carol Diehl

Chris Verene at Paul Morris

If anyone requires proof of the feminist assertion of the "male gaze" and the sexual pleasure derived from looking, photographer Chris Verene's "Camera Club" series provides it. Verene's 14 lurid, hypervivid images showing amateur male photographers plying their "art" on half-dressed young women make such theoretical hypotheses humorously literal. By stepping back with his own camera for a view of the person

doing the looking, Verene plainly reveals the myriad hidden agendas which haunt the practice of photography.

These lasciviously banal 24-by-20-inch Cibachromes make hyperbolically clear photography's power imbalance. The Camera Club's operation is founded on a devious, sleazy grift: the girls are promised magazine exposure, and nonprofessional male photographers are rewarded with access to acquiescent female pulchritude. The predatory eeriness of this scenario is underscored by Verene's

clever compositions, which situate the girls in miniature in the photographic background while the aggressively hulking backs and elbows of the male shutterbugs consume most of the frame.

Though their faces are obscured by turned backs or cameras clutched to eyeballs, the photographers' personalities are nevertheless revealed in a shared posture of hunched-over intensity, the puddles of sweat erupting through their shirts, and the bald pates testifying to entrenched middle age. Their neurotically prim sportswear of shorts, knee socks, and fat ankles stuffed into cheap loafers provides an amusing counter to their frantic postures, suggestive of big-game photojournalists angling for the optimum vantage on their nubile, static prey.

Verene has judiciously selected not only the backs which best betray his photographers as prosaic, domesticated rakes, but also the unguarded expressions of the models who await direction or look into the camera; their frozen bewilderment highlights the vulnerability of their position as patsies in this grown-up game. Adding yet another sinister dimension to the proceedings are the lacy curtains and floral bedspreads of cheerily decorated suburban bedrooms, where the fresh imprints of vacuum cleaners on wall-to-wall carpeting suggest absent wives who have given over their neatly decorated lair to husbands or sons to practice their unsavory sport.

Underneath the obvious

exploitative quality which pervades these works is a mood of despondency which enhances their narrative complexity. A sense of sad desperation can be found not only in the girls, who willingly strip on the thin chance of fame, but also in the men, who lurch pathetically forward toward an elusive youth and beauty. —Felicia Feaster

Roberto Castro-Polo at Ramis Barquet

The Cuban-American artist Roberto Castro-Polo has returned to art-making after a hiatus of almost 20 years, during which time he developed a reputation as a collector-connoisseur and was the main protagonist of a complex judicial affair that stretched out over several years. While being held in an Italian prison on an extradition warrant, he began painting portraits of inmates. In this exhibition of abstract photo collages, his first solo New York exhibition since the early 1970s, he demonstrated that his psyche is marked by the prison experience.

In a recent interview, the artist explained that during his collaged promenades in prison, it was as if the prison bars were between him and whatever he looked at. In these new works, he uses the grid (a form which was present in his pre-prison work) not only to mimic the prison bars but also to manipulate the position of the viewer.

In his "No Exit" series, a work titled *No Entry* consists of 209 gray Polaroids in varying gradations, with a boldly red-lettered "No Entry" sign screwed on at one side. In *No Entry (Reversal)* the sign, reversed and grayed, appears within the collaged images as if it were behind the grid formed by their white borders. By pairing these two works, Castro-Polo displaces viewers, positioning them both inside and outside, as seer and seen. In the reversals of signs reading "No Entry," "No Exit" and "Do Not Feed the Animals," we become the caged subjects.

In his "Promenade" series, Castro-Polo offers 12 close-up views of straw (yellow-green), stones (blue) and rose petals (magenta), each whole seen as through a grid. The artist has explained that during his prison strolls, he never looked up, for to do so would be to see the hideousness around him (e.g. drug addicts, prison guards, metal fences, concrete walls); instead he looked down, at his feet and at the rocks which surrounded them. With these large-scale works, Castro-Polo forces the viewer to experience the limited, claustrophobic vision of a prison "landscape."

In the "Metamorphosis" series, the most playful of the lot, he composes visual sentences by juxtaposing Mona Lisa's face with various masculine body parts, e.g., penises and/or hairy legs and feet. Unlike Duchamp's aim in *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Castro-Polo seeks to make androgynous, or to hermaphrodize, the Mona Lisa, who has become for him a symbol for the society at large and its present-day gender confusion.

"Night Flight" is a series of collaged Fresson prints of white doves that appear to be caught in upward flight against a black backdrop, viewed through a white grid. The doves, almost escaping the picture plane, their bodies fragmented by the work's border, are a metaphor for the artist's newfound freedom. Perhaps in Castro-Polo's next show he will have freed himself from psychic incarceration and, by extension, from the grid. We've a lot to look forward to, for even now we see his talent and promise.

—Maura Reilly

Roberto Castro-Polo: *No Entry*, 1997, 209 Polaroid 667 positives and mixed mediums, 47 by 64 inches; at Ramis Barquet.

