

The Highlights - New Photography 2007 at MOMA

Big, articulate, and competent are all words that come to mind walking through the *New Photography* show at the Museum of Modern Art. Yet, it all seems a bit lacking for excitement or for any lust for its subject matter. A photographer's lust for the medium and its quirky but precise nature is often what turns me on in pictures; this sentiment is all over the adjacent photography galleries, in photographs from the museum's stellar permanent collection, ranging from Lee Friedlander to Thomas Struth.

Scott McFarland, *Orchard*, 2006. Pigmented inkjet print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2007 Scott McFarland

It is perhaps my own defect that I feel the work is too appropriate and self-informed, but it certainly lacks any wildness. The players this year are Scott McFarland, Berni Seale, and Tanyth Berkeley. To the curator's credit, the selection is diverse, including portraiture, faked landscapes, and stuff resembling crude color drawings all on show. Works suggest that young artists with cameras are prodding the borders of the medium, with the most straight photographic work being done by Berkeley in a series of portraits that deal with images of femininity.

So, why is it so bland? McFarland's images really shouldn't be - at all. He has scale at work, with images several meters in length, but the landscapes are merely well-made. I have to emphasize they are well-made in the extreme, but they lack any real voice. To explain these images requires some doing: They are uber-landscapes made of multiple images of spaces that don't exist and are mostly full of foliage. He is a bit like a terrestrial landscape artist with no boss to say, "Why the hell is that going there?" McFarland might fancy getting a boss, because at best, in terms of content, he only makes the seasons shift across his print of an orchard, which is evidenced by dead leaves versus bursting green leaves in different parts of the frame. He might have given a tech-head a hard-on five years ago, but the method today feels dated if it is only in service of itself.

The good news is, with the chops this artist has, if he can find something less basic to say, or perhaps cryptic enough to be intriguing, he could really be a great new voice in photography. Perhaps an American counterpoint to the always stoic and blank world of the Becher school of photography including Thomas Demand and all those who've hitched their wagon to that dream.

Tanyth Berkeley, *Grace in Window*, 2006. Pigmented inkjet print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2007 Tanyth Berkeley

Meanwhile, I found the prints of Berkeley to be beautiful and some of the subjects to have a radiant glow. She's got some skill in taking portraits and definitely casts an ethereal glow on her prints. It is an affectation I normally can't get through, but it almost works here, as the glow surrounds a strange cast of people in her off-color portraits. The problem is that taking pictures of people that emphasize a sort of strangeness or "xeno" quality seems to be altogether its own school now post-Diane Arbus up to the recent Yalies that Berkeley owes a debt to, such as Katy Grannan.

I will say that her photography is almost good enough to make this a non-issue, but I've got my guard up and wonder why people select subjects that suggest something is off. Berkeley identifies people on the street or subway, and over a period of time coaxes them into posing. I personally doubt based on this evidence that her psyche and reasons for choosing people is a rich enough subject to mine - sadly. A print particularly guilty of this conspicuous attachment to alien qualities as a subject is "Grace in Window," a photograph of a pale girl who looks almost albino and transparent.

Berkeley did a clever thing to print body-length portraits that stand in front of the viewer, because the scale brings the subjects to life and divorces the image from any notion of possession suggested by small prints. This is another reason why "Grace in Window," which is a smaller print, is not successful, compared with works where the viewer must stand back and address the subject. One is more taken when looking at the large print as one might look at themselves in a full-length mirror before setting out for the evening. This selection of body-length prints shows immense promise and credit to the artist's understanding of the idea of the way people engage with photographs and others in a space.

I hope she keeps the themes loose though and seeks out people she understands better, as it feels in these instances that her camera is gawking at transgendered people. The primary fear for this sort of artist is that the next step will be a tight group of portraits of one type of person, which is for some inexplicable reason now the vogue in art photography; this sort of shooting method seems prescriptive and more tied to journalism.

Seale I will address here briefly, because I'm a bit lost with this one. Continuing the very international tradition of this recurring show, she hails from South Africa with some fresh ideas, such as tracing family portraits on crepe paper. Frankly though, she destroys her work with boorish wall texts that are the hallmark of failed conceptual work. She refreshingly seems willing to dance at the edges of the medium, but she needs work that succeeds or fails on its own terms. Furthermore, if the artist insists on using text on the wall shouldn't the text be given as much due consideration as the prints? Rather here is it relegated to a very

standard plaque that feels like a way of justifying the creativity rather than underlining it.

She also has a sequence of photographs of a woman ascending and descending grape-skin mounds in separate frames, which someone later told me was the artist herself. I just don't understand why she made that series of pictures.

Personally I am a fan of the diversity of the *New Photography* series over the years and look forward to the next one. I hope the next group of artists, however, will produce work with more flesh and bone to it, and overall be more surprising. Infectious work is the province of the young and carries the medium forward. We have a stale box of cookies here. They appear to me perhaps overeducated in their picture making and undernourished when it comes to a passion for their work. Jerry Saltz used to bitch about art that looks like homework, and I didn't get it then, but now I do. The hollow nature of the work is best emphasized by going in the next gallery and staring at William Eggleston's photographs sitting alongside prints by the man who gave him his first show, former MOMA curator John Szarkowski. It is the difference between hitting a snare drum and standing outside a karaoke hall at night hearing the vague thuds of bass ringing; one knows what it is, and the other is murmured but knows what it wants to be.