

The New York Times

© 2013 The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, AUGUST 9, 2013

Fine Arts | Leisure

Not for the Family Album



ROBERT E. JACKSON AND PACE/MACGILL GALLERY, NEW YORK

Anonymous, found or outsider photographs, taken largely by, and of, people whose identities are long lost, exist in unfathomable numbers, like stars or grains of sand. Not surprisingly, this flood of visual culture, social and personal history and sometime art generates its own connoisseurs and collectors, as well as heated bidding on eBay.

ROBERTA SMITH
ART REVIEW

At least two major museum exhibitions have celebrated the genre in recent years. In 2000, the Metropolitan Museum of Art staged the astounding and moving "Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection." The images ranged in date from 1915 to 1960 but were concentrated in the 30s and '40s. Summing them up in the show's catalog, Mr. Walther wrote that they documented "a profound innocence, tremendous pride and a unique sense of humor in American society."

In 2007, the National Gallery of Art in Washington mounted "The Art of the American Snapshot: 1888-1978," an equally honed survey (judging from the catalog, since I managed to miss it), drawn from the collection of

Continued on Page 25

Snap Noir A gelatin silver print by an unknown photographer in this show at the Pace/MacGill Gallery. "Photo Brut" at Zieher-Smith also displays found work.

From Weekend Page 21

Robert E. Jackson, a onetime student of art history who began buying photographs in the 1990s.

Now Mr. Jackson has organized a crystalline exhibition at the Pace/MacGill Gallery called "Snap Noir: Snapshot Stories From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson." It luckily coincides with an exhibition at Zieher-Smith in Chelsea, "Photo Brut: As Collected by David Winter," which reflects the hungry, ecumenical eye of a New York artist turned private dealer specializing in photography.

The two shows make a great pair. Both blur the lines between art and document and, at times, between collector and artist, since both men assemble images into configurations that mimic different strands of Conceptual Art and appropriation art. Yet, in other ways, the presentations couldn't be more different.

Refined and elegantly spare, Mr. Jackson's show initially portrays photography as an exceedingly private act in four short-story-like sequences of images. Each group was taken by a fairly skilled or at least intent photographer; each follows a fixed subject through time. Also on view are two additional sequences of photographs, all taken by different people, collected and assembled by Mr. Jackson.

The groups by single photographers have a palpable erotic undercurrent. Strange psychologies are sometimes unveiled, and the voyeuristic side of photography is demonstrated, though with a delicate restraint.

A sense of protectiveness suffuses six photographs of a well-turned-out, dark-haired woman, who is almost never without a worn stuffed rabbit that she holds as a small child might, even when she is out in the desert, looking at

hieroglyphs. Intimacy turns slightly predatory in four images of a woman in the open door of a tiny swimming pool changing room, baring her breasts but not her face. Her weight and swimwear change, but her apparent shame is constant. The constricted space only amplifies her discomfort. (The vertically divided images recall Matisse's austere 1914 "Window at Collioure" — and make you glad he left it unpopulated.)

A striking lack of shame permeates 16 images of a fleshy young man standing on the roof of a building in an American city in the late 1960s. Occasionally trying out he-man poses, he dons an assortment of revealing briefs



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM DAVID WINTER AND ZIEHERSMITH

Top and above, anonymous photos at ZieherSmith; below left, an image by an unknown at Pace/MacGill.



ROBERT E. JACKSON AND PACE/MACGILL GALLERY, NEW YORK

and the occasional flowered bikini. It's not clear what he was after, but his tangle of ambition and desire makes you pull for him. (The possibility that this man took the photographs himself by using a timer might explain their lack of self-consciousness and also lends an air of urgency.) A simpler aim — to be a professional photographer, perhaps for travel promotions — is at play in

"Snap Noir: Snapshot Stories From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson" runs through Aug. 21 at the Pace/MacGill Gallery, 32 East 57th Street, Manhattan; (212) 759-7999, pacemacgill.com. "Photo Brut: As Collected by David Winter" runs through Aug. 23 at ZieherSmith, 516 West 20th Street, Chelsea; (212) 229-1088, zieherSmith.com.

four steeply angled, almost decapitating shots of a man and a woman relaxing on a chair and a folding chaise longue on seamless white photographer's paper. The fourth shot is best, thanks mostly to the spatial ambiguities created by the woman's floral playsuit. Whether the image would help anyone land a job is anyone's guess.

Form rules, though not without psychological tensions, in the smaller of the two groups of images assembled by Mr. Jackson. Its 10 images were all shot outdoors through chain-link fencing. People, if present, are usually at a distance, engaged in sports or childhood play. These images say no to voyeurism, and given the ambiguous dramas of the previous groupings, this can leave you feeling both bereft and relieved.

The final group is Mr. Jackson's tour de force, a sequence of 21 images, each one stranger and often more surreal than the last; they usually feature one or two people and sometimes animals, including dead deer. In their power, complexity and unease, these are stand-alone images. The first echoes some of the previous sequences here; it shows a virginal young woman with bared breasts and covered face, cringing in the back seat of a car, as if her lover had abandoned her to a newspaper photographer.

Rather than a short story, some of these images suggest a disjointed life cycle, perhaps with religious undertones, from cradle to ghost, with a final silhouette of a young woman cast on a veil-like curtain. And the most populous image (five people) is a kind of adoration scene, except that the object of awe is a waffle. A waffle iron has been demonstrated, and the result, held in a man's lap, is a halo, a womb and a giant communion wafer all in one.

These startling images ramp up to the relative tumult of Mr. Winter's found photographs at ZieherSmith. Far less concerned with craft than Mr. Jackson, Mr. Winter casts a far wider net. He seems to approach photographs as blunt instruments; consequently his show lurches around the social landscape, leavening moments of brutality and ineptitude with glimpses of tenderness.

For example, a cluster of im-

ONLINE: FOUND PHOTOS

More images from the "Photo Brut" and "Snap Noir" shows:

nytimes.com/design

ages of car crashes is flanked by a scene of two men kissing on the street and three images of just-married couples peering out the oval back windows of late-'40s coupes. Nearby, a group of small vintage photographs capture all kinds of oddities, often involving mirrors or awkward sex.

On a nearby wall is a close-up of a note on cardboard in which the muscular cursive and odd line breaks amount to poetry. It reads: "Janitor: Go to the top/floor, you'll see so/mething important in the bathtub. I discovered it today but I did/not tell the police be/cause I do not want to/get in a jam. It's a/murder."

This Weegee-like atmosphere extends to images of men in jail cells and on a chain gang; people being coaxed down or grabbed from ledges; and others leaping to their deaths. There are compressed short-story moments as well, like a heartbreaking image of a portly bourgeois couple on a bridge or riverside promenade. The stock market has crashed. She's inside a stone balustrade; he's outside, hesitating. It may not be a great photograph, but it is a small American tragedy.

Mr. Winter makes a kind of art of his own when he assembles mug shots in framed grids: men with freshly bandaged heads or faces in one; smiling women, apparently drunk, in another. Most affecting are the mug shots of both men and women with their eyes closed, trying to make it all go away. Meanwhile, a grid of blurry close-ups of 1960s actresses on TV screens, with each star's name written in pen on the border, is, with no help at all, compelling appropriation art.

Mr. Winter's show settles down a bit when it turns to commercial camerawork: early blue cyanotypes of chairs, hand-colored pictures of candy, no-nonsense pictures of trailer frames and, best of all, black-and-white images of fastidiously coiffed women, seen from the back. But all in all, "Photo Brut" is a perfect title.