Houston Is Hopping Thanks to FotoFest

By William Mullen

The Houston FotoFest 2010 Biennial has stirred the city with exhibitions. There are displays of photographs in more than 100 venues, many including the work of several photographers, so the variety is extraordinary.

Beatrix Reinhardt: Members Only—America ▼ RE-groups—American Photographers Before 1950 Houston Center for Photography 1416 West Alabama Through April 25

The Houston Center for Photography sponsors classes, workshops, lectures, spot magazines, and exhibitions. One of its three biennial shows is Beatrix Reinhardt’s large-format color photos of American private clubs. The titles give an idea of the sorts of institutions she found: “Yes吸收s Garner and Hunting Club, Fulton, NY, 2006,” “Olympiascock Pigeon Fic Club, Astoria, NY, 2009,” and “American Club, Newport, Wales, 2005.” The spaces are shot with no club members present, but Reinhardt indicates the interest that brought them together and something of their social beings. The wall of the fun club is covered with photos of the Greek acorn team; the vinyl stacking chairs and Pimms tables suggest people of modest means.

Also at HCP are some American group photos taken from WMH, hunt’s “Collection Blind Fists.” Many are in crafted frames that are as much of the early 20th-century as the images they hold. There is a hand-colored print of “Veterans Fawleys, 1880,” they stand in military formation in downtown New York. The hounded gents in “Hannover—No. 1” (Kodak Brown, 1893) are arrayed in five neat rows in what might be a school assembly room. There’s the “Better City Houston—Sawon’s Variety Jobbies, 1925,” and “The Human Liberty Bell, 27500 Officers & Men, at Camp Shum, General Hugh L. Scott CMH, 1868,” cracked, but stupendous.

Craig Mammone: A Few Squares Blocks Jane Tonn: Foreigners in Paradise FotoFest Gallery Headquarters 1113 Vise St. Through April 24

The FotoFest Headquarters are in a landmarked and exquisitely renovated warehouse building with long corridors and empty rooms ideal for exhibitions. Craig Mammone is one of the 11 artists in a group show there: “Whatever Was Splendid: New American Photographs” curated by Aaron Schuman. Mr. Mammone’s black-and-white photos are of panoramic, black-and-white and color plate views in the folksy era, as well as some images not seen in images in new Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The pictures of “Pas, New Orleans, 2006,” “Precious, New Orleans, 2009,” and “Ce Ce, New Orleans, 2008” are brutal but affecting, in the tradition of earlier social photography. The subjects, sad or clothed, are not in a free environment but rather are used to see value (or, left for us to deal with as best we can). Jane Tonn’s series of her family coming to grips with their lives as newcomers in New York have a very different emotional valence than Mr. Mammone’s, but are also affecting. “Grandfather Helping Grandmother Up the Hill to Pick Collard Greens, 2007,” “Aunt’s Tin Pail Picked Up, 2006,” and the self-conscious teenager “Sara, 2006” reflect traditional Chinese family piety. Elements of the material culture surrounding the family in its Brooklyn home—even items of plastic and Styrofoam—are treated with respect of revered household objects.

Ruptures and Continuities: Photography Made After 1960 From the MFAH Collection Museum of Fine Arts, Houston 1001 Bissonnet Through May 9

With Villa Turk, the MFAH’s curator of photography since 1976, established Houston as an important city for the medium. This exhibition of over 200 photographs draws on a pool of 4,000, and includes work by 89 photographers. The show begins with a startling diptych by Maykichi Hatakeyama, “Bust? 2005,” that puts the viewer in the midst of flying rock fragments from a dynamite explosion in a quarry. Center Vandykulsma Nakamori placed the large-format piece at the entrance of the exhibition as a metaphor for the “ruptures” in photographic practice he then explores along with photographic “continuities.”

After an introductory section, Mr. Nakamori divides the works into five categories: Self-Performance, Trans-formation of the City, Directorial Mode and Constructed Environments, New Landscape, and Memory and Archive. Notable artists are included throughout, such as William Eggleston, Philip Lachen daCunza, Victoria Sanzbalan, Robert Polidore, Edward Sutin, and Harold and Hills Becher. A potent source of experi-ence is Conceptualism. Sol LeWitt, one of the included artists, has explained: “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important as-pect of the work… all of the plans… hand and the execution is a minority affair.” These works may be interesting to think about, but perform are not too much to look at. Continuity is represented by works such as Simon Norfolk’s assert-ively chromatic images from western Afghanistan.

The Road to Nowhere? FotoFest at Winter Streets Studios 251 Winter St. Through April 25

This exhibition includes series by 28 photographers curated by Natsuko Kato. Monique less favorite in Greg Komar’s “Cubital (White Max-taug), 2000.” Projected on a wall in a darkened room are three large-scale videos of a white Ford Mustang parked on a country road with its headlights on and its horn blasting. The videos are projected until the headlights go out, the horn is silent and the battery is dead. This is the avant-garde equivalent of waterboarding.

Mary Green’s series “My White Friends” features informal color portraits. “E.L., Chicago, IL, 2000” is a young man passed on a residential street with his building. The young man in “U.S. Army, New York, 2009” is sitting in the shade in an office with his feet up on a conference table; skyscrapers are visible out the window. “J.E., Chicago, IL, 2000” is a young woman leaning on a kitchen counter. Ms. Greene successfully varies her format to suit her subjects. “Young Blood” in a series of chromogenic prints of children hunting by Brita Larson, “Ruthie’s First Kill, 2007” shows a young girl with one hand on a dead bear and the other holding a bloody blade; her expression is unexplained. The orange caps and vests worn by the three young girls in “Pheasant Hunter, 2007” stand out against the snowy field. One girl holds a shotgun; two held dead fowl. By and large, the children in “Young Blood” take their hunting with commercial seriousness.

Mr. Mullen writes about photography for the Journal. See his works at www.williammunellphotograph- y.com.

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