ART REVIEW

The Fully Engaged Lens

"Tête-à-Tête Series: Intimate Portraits of Two Adolescent Sons," by Martine Fougeron.

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As a witness to human history, photography has been much questioned over the past three decades. Ever more sophisticated digital techniques of manipulation have only further eroded faith in its trustworthiness as a truth teller. Yet intrepid photojournalists continue to fan out all over the world, uploading images of people, places and events of almost every conceivable kind, from scenes of mundane domesticity in remote locations to recordings of terrifying natural and manmade disaster.

What we gain from this flood of visual reportage is a bigger and harder-to-answer question now than it was in the pretelevision, mid-20th-century heyday of Life and other photojournalism magazines. Concentrating on documentary photography, this year’s New York Photo Festival offers little by way of new insights, but it does provide an occasion to survey the field and think about...

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The main event is “Photography Now: engaged, personal, and vital,” an exhibition of prints by 22 photographers, organized by Elisabeth Biondi, former photography editor for The New Yorker, and Enrico Bossan, an Italian photojournalist who is the editorial director of Colors magazine.

Each of the artists represented has focused on some particular subject matter. Carolyn Drake, who lives in Istanbul, presents pictures documenting the lives of the Uighurs, people of Turkish descent who dwell in Western China and whose culture and language are at risk of extinction. Photographs by Irina Werning address a curious custom in Argentina: women growing their hair to extraordinary lengths. In her images, women appear singly or in groups with their backs to the camera, displaying tresses falling below their waists and even further.

“Pornoland” is a series by Stefano De Luigi of Italy offering often indirect glimpses of people performing in pornographic films or relaxing between takes. Shot from oblique angles, the photos resemble tasteful, arthouse film stills. Clémence de Limburg of New York follows athletes “of restricted stature” who have participated in the Dwarf World Games and similar competitions.

Other subjects include police officers in post-9/11 New York by Ethan Levitas; the photographer Martine Fougeron’s own teenage boys; life and culture in Greenland by Andrea Gjestvang; and the world of people in the Appalachian foothills of southeastern Ohio, where poverty, drug abuse and bad education prevail, by Matt Eich.

Following the theme of engaged photography set by Ms. Biondi and Mr. Bossan, numerous other galleries in Dumbo are presenting exhibitions of social photography. Umbrage has pictures of people working in Nevada brothels by Marc McAndrews; Smack Mellon hosts a group show of hipsterish, diaristic photographs in the Nan Goldin-Ryan McGinley mode; at the Tobacco Warehouse, there is a panoramic wall of 150 portraits of New Yorkers from all walks of life by Alexandros Lambrovassilis and a selection of works by Chinese photographers on the landscape and nomadic, camel-based culture of Xiang Sha Wan, a high-altitude desert area in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region of China.

The overall effect of these and many other more or less urgently topical, invariably well-made images is ultimately numbing. There is the feeling of a fast, superficial skimming of the world appealing to random, short-attention-span curiosity. Hardly any of works in the show put together by Ms. Biondi and Mr. Bossan are striking enough as stand-alone pictures to offset a wish for deeper understanding of the subjects they illustrate. You want a 15,000-word, New Yorker-style essay on the lives of Saudi women that Olivia Arthur’s pictures only hint at or on the back story of the Mongolian boy in the Nike track outfit by A Yin.

Alejandro Chaskielberg’s large, vividly colorful, nighttime pictures of people living on islands of the Paraná River delta in South America have a nearly hallucinogenic beauty, but as far as telling us what life is really like there, they are practically mute.
Montages of old photographs, letters and recent pictures shot in Vietnam by Jessica Hines tell the story of her brother, a Vietnam vet who suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder and took his own life in 1979. They are affectingly lyrical, but you wish she would write a book.

The problem is that so much of what we see here we have seen before on newspaper front pages, online and in movies. What would have been revelatory or shocking in a less image-soaked world just looks like more of the same. Drawing on what you have seen on small and large screens, imagine what sort of violent, bloody and heart-rending scenes you’d expect from a series on the drug war in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and you will have a pretty good idea of what the photographs of Shaul Schwarz look like. What is meant to draw us closer to reality makes us feel more distant and more bemused. The real world becomes a flickering ghost world.

The dream of the heroic, committed photographer appears hard to sustain in a commercial context like that of the photo festival. These days the photographs that are more likely to change how we see the world, that can shock us out of our complacency, are shot by amateurs with camera phones. Abu Ghraib comes to mind. The professional photojournalist has been reduced to a content provider for the insatiable beast of the global information disseminating machine.

The New York Photo Festival 2011 runs through Sunday at various locations in Dumbo, Brooklyn, with the main exhibition, “Photography Now: engaged, personal, and vital,” at 81 Front Street, at Washington Street; newyorkphotofestival.com.
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