

## Hauser & Wirth Has Your Multi-Generational Photography Weekend

by Scott Indrisek 27/06/14

New York's Hauser & Wirth has a neat couplet of exhibitions opening in conjunction with each other, both examining the ways in which the boundaries of photography have been pushed (and chopped, warped, slashed, and occasionally embedded in concrete) over the past four decades. First up is "The Photographic Object, 1970" a reprise of the 1970 Museum of Modern Art show "Photography into Sculpture," curated by Peter Bunnell. The new iteration (pulled together by Olivier Renaud-Clement, with serious assistance from Philip Martin of Los Angeles's Cherry & Martin, who staged a similar group of works at that gallery) retains 19 of the original 23 artists in that pioneering exhibition, most of them based on the west coast. As Mary Statzer, who is editing a catalogue on the original 1970 show, noted, the exhibition was truly "out of step" with prevailing art world trends — neither close enough to what she called the "straight" photography of Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, nor to the cerebral noodlings of Conceptualism. The prevailing hand of Robert Heinecken looms large — five of the participants in the 1970 show were his current or former students — and his inclusion here includes one "puzzle" piece (human anatomy dissected into 24 small prints), and a semi-goofy collage-style piece, "Breast Bomb." Other artists in the male-heavy show tend to fixate equally on female anatomy and how it can be distorted, disassembled, or re-imagined: Robert Watts's "Girl With Mole That Lights Up," Jack Dale's "Untitled Cubed Woman." But one of the few women participants, Ellen Brooks, was also fascinated by what new photographic techniques could do to the human form: Her "Flats: One Through Five" is a series of small, model-size tableaux, featuring shaped photographs of a nude couple on faux-grass terrain, as if a pair of free-loving hippies had rolled onto the square domain of a golf course. (A massive, life-size version of a similar piece is installed in the back gallery — evidently you can lay down on the "lawn," so be sure to take a selfie and see how Instagram feels about the piece's full-frontal male nudity.)

In some ways, the most contemporary-seeming pieces are a pair by Robert Brown and James Pennuto that take images of landscape (a tractor-furrowed dirt field; a hill) and print them onto shaped, unnatural mediums (vacuum-formed plastic, acetate). Richard Jackson's "Negative Numbers" is also strangely fascinating: A wooden table holding two backlit photo negatives, a nearly indiscernible image of what might be a young man posed at an amusement park, with the numbers of the negatives scrawled on top in a very shaky hand. Elsewhere, artists run through every conceivable novelty, trick, and innovation possible: Folding a print into a pillar-shape (Jerry McMillan's "Patty as Container"); burying an image in thick Lucite, or using a chunk of shaped Lucite to augment the composition of an accompanying photograph (Robert Watts's "BLT" and "Pork Chop on a Plate with Pea," respectively); turning a flat scene into a dimensional, Cubist object (Dale Quarterman's "Untitled"); printing images on all sides of cardboard cubes that can be stacked and rearranged at will.

If "The Photographic Object" doesn't strike the same subversive, controversial blow that its 1970 edition did, that's understandable — we're pretty blasé these days about the cross-pollination of mediums. The companion piece to the show, "Fixed Variable," in a modest side-room down at Hauser & Wirth's 18th Street gallery, shows how far we've come. The young, mostly New York-based artists here, marshaled by the gallery's Madeline Warren and Yuta Nakajima, are focused more on formal, rather than figurative, aspects. The curators joke that the works can be divided between the "gritty and the gridy," from Ethan Greenbaum's prints of street surfaces on vacuum-sealed plastic to John Houck's mathematically-derived, cleanly-folded C-prints. Warren and Nakajima note a few other defining elements: a reliance on digital technologies; a prevailing sense of humor; and a willingness to use image archives that didn't exist in the '70s, like the massive trove of stock and found photography on the Internet. This compact, streamlined show is a winner, and acts as a similar checklist of the tactics available to today's practitioners. Letha Wilson's C-prints of rock formations or landscapes embedded in panels of concrete — or in some cases printed directly on concrete — deserve all the buzz they've gotten in recent years. (She also has a terrific floor-piece here, a print of a sunset affixed to a curled panel of Corten steel.) Kate Steciw combines shaped frames with sheets of Plexi and hyperactive image collages to make some of the most purely sculptural works, including one that hangs from the ceiling, as menacing as a guillotine. Lucas Blalock digitally edits "real" photographs to create unreal oddities, like a four-pronged mutant cactus. And the show includes three works by Chris Wiley — a pair

of the wildly framed “Dingbats” prints recently featured at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, and a series of wall prints made by cutting faux-marble wallpaper into large stickers.

A word to the wise: See “The Photographic Object” uptown first, to appreciate the historical and technological progression between that survey and this current snapshot. The enlightening thing is that, despite the vast terrain covered in both shows, the potentials of photography seem far from exhausted. In many ways, the photograph has become one of many items in the toolbox of contemporary artists — much to the chagrin of traditional photographers, who doubtlessly still grumble about the ways in which their medium is molested along the cutting-edge.