

TITLE MAGAZINE

Marc Blumthal “Finding Nemo”

Posted: July 23rd, 2012

NAPOLEON

Through July 27, 2012

By Jacob Feige



Marc Blumthal reinvents found and personal photographic images in *Finding Nemo*, his exhibition of manipulated digital prints at Napoleon. Ambiguity and abstraction begin as degradation of these images —deletions and expanding halftone dots— then becoming autonomous forms, their sources often completely lost. To varying degrees, a trace of the original is still evident, from a vague outline of floating human blobs in *Untitled Jump*, overtaken by halftone abstraction, to the precise outline of a swaddled newborn, replaced with an inconspicuous bit of background image in *My Father Had a Vasectomy*.

It's easy to articulate what's lost in these works: a clear photographic narrative and a distinction between original and found, personal and mass produced image. What's gained is something subtler, varied, and less straightforward. In works such as *Untitled Wave*, *Untitled Jump*, and *Untitled Betty*, a distinctly digital brand of halftone is the basis for a pattern-based abstraction. Figures are still visible through the dots, but just barely, leaving these pieces with an uncanny human presence, even as formal pattern steals the show. The surface of *Untitled Betty* is reflective aluminum, printed over with halftone abstraction. Unlike the mirror works of the Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, whose retrospective appeared at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2010-11, one strains to find the figure amidst dot patterns, occasionally stung with the embarrassment of seeing oneself in the reflection. More than being a participant in this piece, one feels they have been caught looking in the mirror.

Two of the most compelling works in the exhibition are photographic images that have been emptied of their focal content, leaving behind sparse mysteries. The aforementioned *My Father Had a Vasectomy*, with its phantom baby silhouette, becomes a portrait of a man whose tired self-satisfaction is misplaced without a child in hand. Does the title shed light on the reinvented significance of the man's smile, the artist's dad happily divulging TMI? The eponymous work *Finding Nemo* is even more puzzling in its reshuffled meaning, or lack thereof. An image of Middle Eastern children in fancy, traditional dress sits to the right of an image of what appears to be a white painting on a wall behind stanchions. On the bottom

of the painting is the word “HOPE” in blue, and above it reads “New Arrivals.” What truth, if any, is this exactly? Like the California pop artist Ed Ruscha’s text works, the relationship between text and image raises questions without providing answers in Blumthals work. At their best, the eight pieces in *Finding Nemo* arrive at semiotic and formal abstraction, opening a speculative space where ambiguous meaning and formalism coexist in precarious balance.

Jacob Feige is an artist and teacher. His work has recently been shown at Chambers FA, Beijing, Movement, UK, and Jolie Laide, Philadelphia.

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