

# A hard look at the unseeable

REPRESENTING THE INTANGIBLE

At: the Photographic Resource Center at  
Boston University, 602 Commonwealth  
Ave., through April 28

By Christine Termin

GLOBE STAFF

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A photography show on the intangible would seem a difficult thing to pull off: If you can't see it, how can you show it? So guest curator John O'Reilly has set himself a daunting task in organizing the "Representing the Intangible" exhibition at the Photographic Resource Center.

"I am using the intangible to imply a latent subject in the photographs, or in the process of experiencing them," he writes in a curatorial statement — i.e., there's more than meets the eye, which is often true of the most complex art in all media. The densely hung exhibition goes from 19th-century family albums to Seth Rubin's contemporary works that read as abstract until you read the titles. The ambitious array travels in too many different directions to hold together as a show, but there are many works of individual interest here, and provocative juxtapositions.

Crowds are one theme, starting with an anonymous late-19th-century collage of photos and prints, mostly of prosperous-looking people culled from different contexts, in different scales. They could be the characters from a multivolume

saga of Victorian life. Around the corner, Tod Papageorge's 1978-79 "New Year's Eve, New York Disco" hangs next to James Nachtwey's 1996 ("Watching an Execution: Afghanistan"). Rapt crowds fill both, people jammed together so you can't, in some cases, see bodies under heads. The subjects — a new beginning and a brutal end — couldn't be more different, but, compositionally, the two photos are eerily similar.

The show's crowd scenes make you extra-aware of the emptiness of James Casebere's "Prison Cell With Skylight," one of the artist's enigmatic constructed-for-the-photo spaces that read as real. There's always an escape route in Casebere's photos: Here it's the skylight, with its promise of a better beyond.

There's a teasing play with scale in the pairing of a circa 1880 photograph, artist unknown, of "Egyptian Statue Fragments" and Rubin's 1994 "Impression of My Face in Mud." While the former print is just over 2 by 3 inches, you understand that the head lying on its back in the desert is a colossus. But you have to think for a minute to realize that Rubin's mud-face,

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which looks like a death mask cast in bronze, is over life size. Abelardo Morell's 1987 "Toy Blocks" likewise deals with scale. Shot from a rugarat perspective, the tower of toys becomes a skyscraper that casts an even more impressive shadow. Next to Morell's blocks is Jacques-Henri Lartigue's 1905 "Dans Ma Chambre," also taken at floor level (and when Lartigue was himself just 11.) Here toy cars are lined up in front of full-size, formidable furniture: The effect is Surrealism before the fact.

The ephemeral blur made permanent by the camera is another recurring presence. It's the soupy fog from which a gleaming train emerges in O. Winston Link's silver print "NW 13," an image reminiscent of Monet's "Gare Saint-Lazare" series celebrating the dynamism of the modern railroad. It's the breath on a bathroom mirror in Dieter Appelt's 1978 "The Spot on the Mirror." It's Paul McDonough's 1986 "View of Hudson River," taken through a humid car windshield where wiper blades have cleared a sweeping curve that turns the scene into something akin to a landscape on a Japanese fan.

"Representing the Intangible" is the fourth and last of the guest-curated, contemporary shows that the PRC has set against the backdrop of a yearlong historical exhibition borrowed from the rich photographic archives of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. This "Photography in Human Experience" project needed more shaping and editing, but its sheer ambition and willingness to consider the medium's entire range are laudable.