

Tangible rewards

John O'Reilly's PRC show is a beauty

BY CHRISTOPHER MILLIS

The first thing you see when you walk into the PRC's exhibit "Representing the Intangible" hints at both the show itself and the unusual curatorial spirit behind it. In a Victorian (though unadorned) gold-leaf frame the size of an old-fashioned mantel mirror appears "The Fortune Teller." This anonymous work made between 1890 and 1900 is the photographic equivalent of 19th-century whimsy, a delicately zany, balanced, complicated collage of cutouts of prints and photos of people's faces and bodies: men with Abe Lincoln beards, women in corsets, magazine images that look as if they'd come from hundred-year-old ads for strapless razors and lavender soap.

The text beneath "The Fortune Teller" identifies it as belonging to the private collection of the show's curator, the renowned photographer John O'Reilly, whose own delicately zany, peculiarly

*See **PRC**, on page 11*



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art

Juxtapositional genius

John O'Reilly knows how to represent those intangibles

PRC, from the cover

balanced, complicated photographic collages are getting recognized as some of the most stirring and accomplished works currently being made in American photography. With the exception of the nearby wall text — sloppily affixed in five separate typed pages, like explanatory material at a grammar-school science fair — O'Reilly's name cannot be found any-

artist's deadpan, bespectacled face posed beside a reproduction of Degas's self-portrait; a miniaturized group of acrobats sporting microscopic erections performing somersaults in outer space — cohere like the lines in Dante's terza rima. That same playful, irreverent, dramatic orchestration of images within a frame now carries over to an entire exhibit, which itself is a kind of collage. And as

and the space they're made to share. O'Reilly charts a different course. By cutting across time and styles and scale and techniques (not to mention the number of private and public collections he raided to pull the show off), the curator brings together subtly related photographs into even more subtly conceived thematic units. There have to be 200 images in "Representing the Intangible" (more than a thousand if you count Karl Baden's book *Every Day*, with its thumbnail self-portraits taken daily for the last 13 years) in a space not much bigger than a conference room, and yet the show feels as lean as a runner's leg.

The result of O'Reilly's painstaking forethought is that you're constantly doing double takes as juxtaposed images ricochet off each other. O. Winston Link's muscular, sprawling oak tree towers in its frame beside an anonymous, miniature, amateur photo of a muscular, shirtless man with his back to the camera doing a one-armed handstand on a chair outdoors, legs upright in the air like the limbs of a tree. An anonymous, crowded image of animals and performers in a three-ring circus appears beside a similarly congested aerial view of New Year's Eve revelers in a New York disco (Tod Papageorge's 1978 *New Year's Eve, NY Disco*), which is itself devastatingly positioned beside a long shot of thousands of hungry, expectant faces belonging to darkly bearded men about to take in a public execution (James Nachtwey's 1996 *Watching an Execution — Afghanistan*).

Although such sequencing proves revelatory — in part by catching us off guard as flora mimics fauna, as fun mimics murder — an analogous yet quieter revelation takes place as groups of photographs segue into other groups. The extraordinary care taken in the overall movement of images in "Representing the Intangible" made me want to do something for the first time ever: follow the precise order the curator had in mind for viewing the show.

Beginning on the left, then, you'll see a stunningly handsome large black-and-white photo by O. Winston Link, *No. 605 Is Steam Cleaned (NW13)*, depicting a frontal view of a magnificent train being steam-cleaned by a solitary man in raingear; the train stands like one of Monet's Rouen cathedrals, a sumptuous monolith feathered in mist. To *No. 605's* right appear five smaller photos by Thomas Roma from a series called *Come Sunday*. They depict children and adults in a church service, beginning with two kneeling women in solemn prayer and mov-

ing on to pictures of swooning adults as a cleric performs the laying-on of hands.

The last photo in *Come Sunday* is a close-up of a man on his knees, head bowed, supporting himself with his hands on a folding chair. The wall ends, and the next picture you see dates from 25 years earlier, Gary Winogrand's 1969 *Los Angeles, CA*. Suddenly you're looking at three mini-skirted, high-heeled, beehive-coiffed babes strolling a swank street with the sun so bright behind them that the shadows of their legs take over the foreground of the frame. What's it doing there? Well, if you look closely, you'll see in the shadow of a nearby store window the crippled kid in a wheelchair with a cup balanced between her knees, her head bent from cerebral palsy in an attitude similar to Thomas Roma's overcome believer.

Then a giant photo by Abelardo Morell appears, a stack of children's toy blocks greatly enlarged and shot from below so that they suggest in their tilting awkwardness the Tower of Pisa and in their outline the Eiffel Tower. We've left the realm of the spirit, ebullient and crushed, for the realm of the imagination, the inner world of

childhood, the place where spirit begins. Only a child, or a gifted photographer recollecting a child's perspective, could see such a construction as magnificent (Morell's print measures 48 by 40). For complement and counterpoint, we next see childhood in its exciting smallness, Jacques-Henri Lartigue's 1905 *Dans Ma Chambre*. In a photo a tenth the size of Morell's we get a long shot from floor level of an array of toy cars; they appear like low-slung buildings against the background skyscrapers of bureaus and dressers and an open door.

In the journey that is "Representing the Intangible" O'Reilly moves us with humor and pathos and a keen sensuality through images of immense range: 16 panels with six photos each of girls in their communion dresses, a publicity shot for a magician's act, a picture of a father standing above the corpse of his Civil War-soldier son. Yet it's his handling that enriches their meaning and depth.

It's unfortunate that the PRC was unable to provide more than seven stapled, photo-copied pages as a catalogue for this extraordinary show, and that it won't be traveling to other cities. ■

"REPRESENTING THE INTANGIBLE"

At the Photographic Resource Center through April 28.

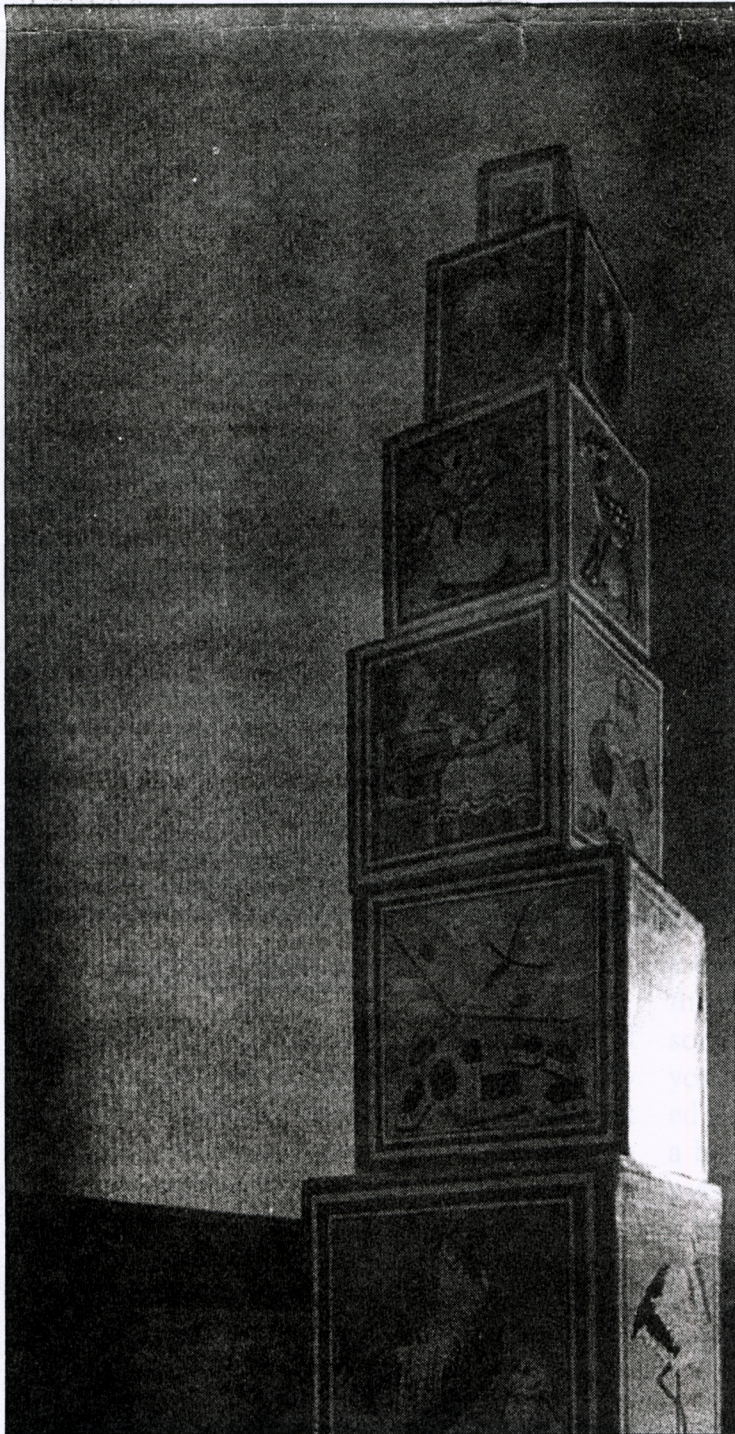
where else in the show. But his spirit is everywhere. And it's the force and humor and generosity of that spirit that makes "Representing the Intangible" one of the most important, iconoclastic, poignant shows of the season. I don't mean just Boston's season. Run, don't walk.

O'Reilly's own collages (he shows at the Howard Yezerki Gallery) read like strangely sensual visual sonnets. Seemingly antithetical images — a snapshot of the

with O'Reilly's own work, "Representing the Intangible" enjoys the luxury — and the integrity — of having been thought about for years.

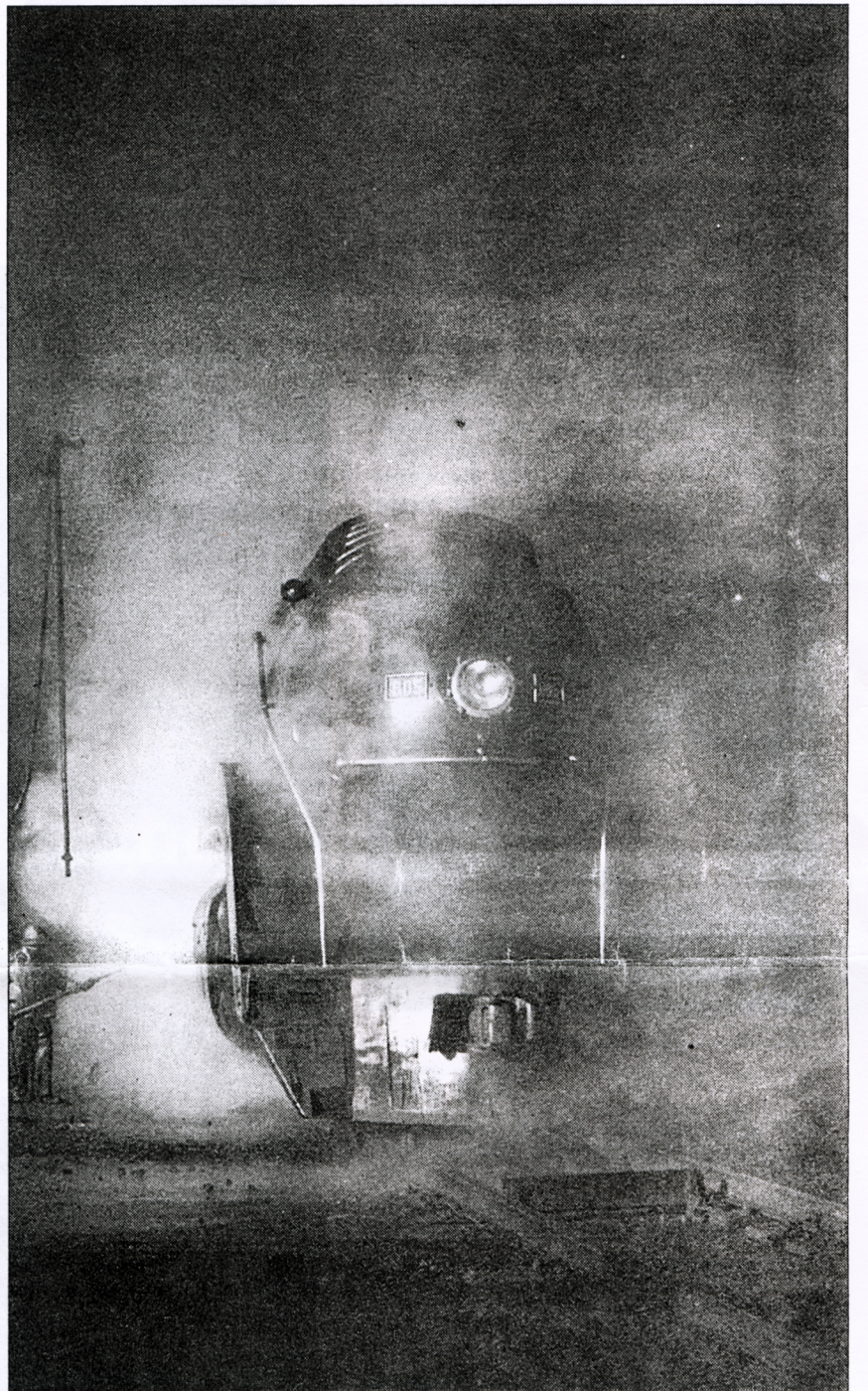
We have grown inured to the brand-name blockbuster group show, as well as to its more demure cousins. The scale and spin and splash of individual pieces attempts to conceal the fact that the gathered works have little or nothing in common beyond the decision-making power of the curator

COURTESY OF ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY



TOY BLOCKS: greatly enlarged and shot from below by Abelardo Morell, they suggest in their tilting awkwardness the Tower of Pisa and in their outline the Eiffel Tower.

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NO. 605 IS STEAM CLEANED (NW13): O. Winston Link's magnificent train stands like one of Monet's Rouen cathedrals, a sumptuous monolith feathered in mist.