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What's New in Photography? Humanism, MoMA Says

A new group show called "Being" moves away from last year's navel-gazing digital obsession to explore reality-based portraiture, politics and gender.

By **ARTHUR LUBOW** MARCH 9, 2018

At the last survey of new photography at the Museum of Modern Art two years ago, the atmosphere was so self-referential and hermetic that a visitor panted for oxygen. Often, the photos were images of images, taken off a computer screen or digitally created in the studio. It seemed as if photography, which continued to engage with the world after modernist painting and literature turned inward, had finally crumpled into solipsism.

A lot can change in two years. In response to the last exhibition and to the intervening political upheavals, the show "Being: New Photography 2018," which opens on March 18, offers a broader and more stimulating range of work. The rubric of "Being," which is defined as "notions of personhood and identity," proves capacious enough to include portraiture, reportage, fashion, and pretty much everything you can turn a camera on. (The museum decided in 2016 to present exhibitions with a theme rather than simply highlighting promising photographers.) The show includes the work of 17 artists — two of whom collaborate as a team — all under 45.

The exhibition was orchestrated by Lucy Gallun, MoMA's assistant curator of photography, who worked on the last one and agrees that this year's represents a departure. "The strongest takeaway from the last show was about the dissemination of images and the way images circulate," she said in a phone interview. "Here it's a much more personal, intimate approach." She added that she "tried to emphasize the diversity of approaches." A sampling of artists included indicates she succeeded in that.

Although questions of racial and gender identity and politics perfume the air, the best photography in the show touches lightly, if at all, on these subjects. One artist who squarely addresses the political predicament is Stephanie Syjuco, 43, a Bay Area resident who was born in the Philippines and immigrated to this country when she was 3. Ms. Syjuco employs diverse formats — installations, performance and photography — to investigate such subjects as the distribution of goods under capitalism and the persistence of neocolonialism.

Her large black-and-white photographs, in which she appears in costume, bring to mind the work of the Samoan-born photographer Shigeyuki Kihara, who also stages self-portraits in the pose of native women in the Pacific islands, reprising how they were depicted in studios decorated with ethnic props by 19th-century photographers.

Unlike Ms. Kihara, who is particularly interested in gender, Ms. Syjuco is more concerned with capitalist commodities, and is a student of how Western manufacturers both appropriated and created "primitive" designs.

She purchased all the ethnic materials that she wears in her photographs at chain stores in a mall in Omaha, where she was living at the time. The clothes conspicuously retain store labels. (She returned them for credit

after the shoots.)

Like the fabrics, the backdrops in the photographs are intensely patterned, in the manner of the “dazzle camouflage” painted on British warships as protection from airplane bombers during World War I. “It was used not to hide the battleships but to confuse enemy aim by making it unclear what you are looking at,” she explained in a phone interview.

In addition to the portraits, which come from a series she calls “Cargo Cult,” Ms. Syjuco has included in the exhibition a series of passport-style self-portraits (taken with her cellphone) with her face obscured, alluding to the anxiety presently felt in immigrant communities in this country.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s “Mirror Study (4R2A0857),” a pigmented inkjet print from 2016, at the Museum of Modern Art. A postmodern portraitist, he reshuffles real material rather than composes on Photoshop. “I’m interested when someone can piece together another layer of meaning from a fragment of a body or the location of a room.” Credit Paul Mpagi Sepuya

Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 35, also critiques photography portraiture, from a vantage point that is more formally inventive and politically oblique than Ms. Syjuco’s. Black and gay, with an interest in investigating his racial and sexual identities, Mr. Sepuya uses collages and mirror shards to fragment the image; and he raises out of their customary invisibility the black cloths and tripods of a photographer’s studio. His photographs were included in the recent “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon” at the New Museum and the current “Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

Along with large inkjet prints on the wall, in the MoMA show he has a table with found objects, both photographs and books, to provide context (a presentation style associated with Wolfgang Tillmans). Mr. Sepuya is a postmodern portrait photographer, but one who chooses to reshuffle real material rather than compose on Photoshop. “There’s a codedness,” he said, describing his work. “I’m interested when someone can piece together another layer of meaning from a fragment of a body or the location of a room.”

And he relates his formal strategy to his sexual orientation. “There is a history of queer social spaces inhabiting the back room,” he said. “In these darkroom portraits, I’m thinking that being under the black cloth is like being in the back room.” It is a space “of creative friendship and sexual exchange all happening in the same places.”

Although photographers have always been acutely conscious of what lies just outside the edges of their pictures, the viewer may overlook this central fact. Mr. Sepuya is not alone in wanting to highlight what usually goes unseen. Andrzej Steinbach, 34, a Polish-born photographer based in Berlin, photographed three young people together, as if in a fashion shoot, and then displayed the portraits as a sequence, where a person who is mostly out of the frame in one picture becomes the central figure in the next. “They switch places and they switch clothing,” Ms. Gallun said. “It’s unsettling.”

Matthew Connors, 42, likens his position as a photographer to the unreliable narrator in contemporary fiction. The body of work he is showing comes from five trips he made to North Korea between 2013 and 2016. Earlier, he took pictures in Egypt during the street demonstrations that culminated in the fall of President Mohamed Morsi. If that job description makes him sound like a photojournalist, he quickly dispels the notion. “I would be a terrible photojournalist, because I’m very slow and I’m not always training myself on the event that’s unfolding,” he said.

In many of his photographs of North Korea, where he was invariably accompanied by a couple of handlers, he emphasizes how partial his images are. He photographs electronic billboards in which the image is incomplete

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because some of the lights are out. He depicts a dark cave decorated for tourists with projected patches of colored lights — a stand-in for the cave in Plato’s allegory, where only the shadows of outside life are visible to those chained within. Both the photographer and his subjects see each other indistinctly, a fact that the sharpness of Mr. Connors’s digital images doesn’t deny.

We are a long way from MoMA’s most famous photography exhibition, Edward Steichen’s “The Family of Man” of 1955, which presented people from all around the world as being more alike than not. Some of the most striking of Mr. Connors’s photographs are portraits of North Koreans: three schoolgirls as frozen as wax-works, one young man affectionately touching another at a public swimming pool. The pictures are compelling but resist easy understanding. The emblematic photograph in Mr. Connors’s contribution to the show appears in a print twice the size and separate from the North Korea pictures: a mask held in a fist at a New York anti-Trump rally. Because of the positioning of the tape and the eyeholes, what we see looks like a crude rendition of a face, but it is actually the back of the mask.

Some of Mr. Connors’s images — the geometric reflections in a nighttime swimming pool, the rushing cascades in a water park — are reminders of the pleasures that photography can provide when practiced by a technically skilled artist. Even more daringly retrograde in the embrace of tradition is Sam Contis, 35, who sometimes shoots with film and a vintage view camera (as well as a digital one). She has made repeated visits over the last five years to photograph the students at Deep Springs College, a small, all-male institution in a remote valley in eastern California. The breadth of her ambition is discernible in the exhibition, and even more so in her impressive book, “Deep Springs.”

Ms. Contis is informed by the great photographers of the American West, notably Timothy H. O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins. She is also very aware of the regional mythology, as conjured up and questioned by predecessors like the director John Ford and the artist Richard Prince.

“Part of this project is thinking about this place that is in my mind,” said Ms. Contis, who was born in Pennsylvania and educated in the East. “I’m not so interested in debunking the myth. I’m more interested in dismantling and taking the multiple myths apart and recontextualizing them.”

Yet while her photographs reflect the history of photography, they also examine a very contemporary issue: the development of masculine identity. In Deep Springs, the young men combine ranching and farming with intensive reading. “There is an expectation of what a man is, especially against the backdrop of the West,” she said. “But it’s really much more nuanced than what our visual culture has shown us.”

In the book, she has the room to evoke the myth of the West with photographs of cattle being branded in a cloud of dust and irrigation lines being adjusted in the majestic high desert. Those in her small grouping at MoMA (supplemented by a brand-new two-channel video) dwell on ambiguities of gender and fragile tenderness.

In one, a recumbent figure in a denim skirt in the grass proves, on second glance, to be a boy; a similar double take establishes the gender of a longhaired youth being embraced from behind by a lean-limbed fellow. Some of Ms. Contis’s photographs are presented as matted, silver gelatin prints. They demonstrate, if there was ever any doubt, that old-fashioned photography in the hands of an artist can feel completely up-to-date.