

Anna Krachey, Jessica Mallios & Adam Schreiber

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

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by Wendy Vogel



Anna Krachey
Four Corners, 2009
Archival inkjet print
30 x 40 inches
Courtesy the artist



Jessica Mallios, *Fin* (2008)
For complete caption see image gallery

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that curator Toby Kamps describes in his catalogue essay as “analysis and divination.” Contemporary art trafficking in social critique often aims to make familiar, commodified objects seem strange. However, the artists here distinguish themselves through an exceptionally metaphoric and material

In *The Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière writes that “metamorphic” art production “aims to play with the forms and products of imagery, rather than carry out their demystification.” For the three photographers whose work is currently on view at the CAMH, this play is visible in the subtle slippages that occur when photographing everyday objects and ephemera. United through their use of the antiquated large-format view camera, Anna Krachey, Jessica Mallios and Adam Schreiber share a common approach to image-making

handling of their subject matter, which results in lush, stunning objects.

Schreiber differentiates their critical approach from preceding generations: “We want to move from ‘looking through’ images to ‘image images.’” That their technique results in images that are both slightly uncanny and clearly art objects is not a contradiction in terms; rather, for these artists, the best work embodies a psychic tension within the frame instead of pointing our attention beyond it.

Jessica Mallios, a former painter, works in two disparate veins: staged portraits of sculptural arrangements in her studio and snapshot-style images of the everyday uncanny. The staged portraits include mysterious still-lives such as *Negative Space (Moon)* (2009), a black-and-white photograph in which a shadow cast by a round plaster object appears as rocky and distant as the celestial satellite itself, and a number of abstract photographs created with an unintentional camera obscura in the artist’s studio. These images, however, are dry compared to Mallios’s take on the world of synthetic objects. It’s in the sharp illumination of the highly constructed world around us that her wit truly shines. In *Fin* (2008), a photo taken inside a Spanish aquarium, a brilliant blue zip-like stripe vertically occupies the left side of a view of a model whale fin. The blue stripe is actually the building’s wall. The unnatural “aquatic” paint color signals that we are in the realm of high artifice, a realm in which the “real” cannot be easily parsed from its simulacra. *Orange Crush* (2009), another lush full-color photograph, shows an appropriately crumpled box of the eponymous soda lit by an orange streetlight. Furthermore, the inexplicably grape-flavored soda’s brand name is signified by the iconic orange slice, not the word, testifying to the brand’s staying power despite its different degrees of semiotic remove.

Anna Krachey’s work directly confronts the world of commercial veneer. The artist cites eBay as an inspiration for her compositional techniques; however, the degree to which the Internet site’s throwaway aesthetic has affected her work is unclear. *Sweetness and Light* (2009), for example, transforms a kitschy piggy-bank in the shape of a paint spill into an elevated, abstract composition by turning the object on its side and placing it in a white room. These meticulously composed photographs of trashy commercial objects do not suggest the traffic of constantly circulating objects in today’s world of digital interconnectedness. On the contrary, it is clear that Krachey is most comfortable with formal play of simple shapes, as in *Milk* (2009), where a milk bottle, eggs and bread on a mirrored tabletop look as exquisite and elevated as a Weston toilet. Her ability to monumentalize is most powerful when she turns the camera on kitschy display techniques. A cropped photo of a wrapping-paper image of a cartoonish road with flowers (*Path*, 2008) exposes how whimsical images are transplanted, reprinted and eventually discarded. With similar success in *Four Corners* (2009), trippy images of iridescent cellophane “gels” (the kind that are used to transform store windows) bleed into psychedelic rivers in the final print, an effect that calls attention to the seductive “smoke and mirrors” of advertising.

Adam Schreiber's work ties questions about imagery, documentation and circulation into a tightly conceptualized body of work. Visually enigmatic, this work most clearly exposes the contingencies of photography as an objective record and a mechanical process. Taking "the archive" as a point of departure, Schreiber is interested not only in how photography becomes an index of culture, but how items of cataloguing, display and organization are preserved and disembodied. *View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826* (2009) is a view of the first photograph by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in its heavily protected case at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Schreiber's painstaking print, requiring digital manipulation and a long exposure time, puts the fragility of photographic materiality into question -- a fragility that extends to the artist's own process. The remainder of his work depicts drab organizational supplies from megacorporations with malicious associations like Halliburton and General Motors. However, there are moments of surprise, as in *Halliburton Archiving Solutions I, 1987* (2009) where a blue "flare" appears on the right side of the photograph. The result of a leaked film canister, the artist's print of this "accidental" shot cements his alliance with otherworldly materiality and the alchemical power of photography—the ways in which a Barthesian "punctum" or spirit might enter a photograph.

Moving away from techniques such as collage and straight appropriation, Mallios, Krachey and Schreiber explore an alternative thread of criticality embraced by James Welling before them. A shared influence and one of the lesser-known members of the Pictures Generation, Welling's work with a view camera eventually moved in a more formal direction than his peers. His silver gelatin prints reduced architectural views of L.A. storefronts into formal plays of light (an analogue of the darkroom procedure of exposure), and his close-up studies of objects like foil created abstract, craggy universes from banal surfaces. A similar desire to inject associative play and a reflexive approach to the medium of photography itself characterizes the work on view at the CAMH.

Taken together, these three photographers exemplify a shift away from the critique of consumer culture by photographers from past generations. By engaging obsolescent technology and investing in the near-surrealistic, this work offers more than a sly recapitulation of the tricks of the trade of the advertising industry (as in Andreas Gursky's digitally-collaged photographs or even Barbara Kruger's iconic work). It offers a connection, rather, to an alternative critical strategy, picking up mnemonic threads hinted at in Crimp's original Pictures catalogue essay. Where Crimp tied the work of 1970s artists to a symbolist legacy invested in formal experimentation, Krachey, Mallios and Schreiber reinvest that legacy with signposts of a post-historical world.

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