
Jacob Korczynski

Made in China
Numéro 81, printemps 2009

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/557ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN
1711-7682 (imprimé)
1923-8932 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu
Life on Mars
55th Carnegie International
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,

Despite fulfilling several different roles during its century-plus history, the Carnegie International exists today as a quadrennial exhibition of international contemporary art. This second-oldest exhibition of its kind opened just months after the first edition of the Venice Biennale, but today the Carnegie International is only one stop in an ongoing global cycle. With each subsequent edition, the exhibition and its institution stand in stark contrast with the proliferation of hundreds of younger biennials that draw upon strategies of site-specificity in order to establish a self-reflexive discourse with the communities in which they are based. Like the Whitney Biennial, each edition of which is dictated primarily by the site of the organizing institution, the Carnegie International must address international contemporary art and its socio-political climate within an exhibition site that is demarcated by the galleries of the Carnegie Museum of Art. While Life on Mars curator Douglas Fogle deserves credit for a heuristic installation of the photograph as museum object after the life of the exhibition has expired, the role of photography in reshaping institutional spaces is perhaps most evident upon entering one of the largest exhibition spaces devoted to a single artist in Life on Mars.

While the ethnographic impulse of Lockhart’s project emphasizes the role of the viewer to contemplate the future function of the photograph as museological object after the life of the exhibition has expired, the role of photography in reshaping institutional space is perhaps most evident upon entering one of the largest exhibition spaces devoted to a single artist in Life on Mars. Here, in the cavernous Carnegie Museum of Art Theater, Sharon Lockhart’s feature-length 16 mm film Pine Flat (2005) is being screened twice daily for the duration of the exhibition. The culmination of years of research in the eponymous community in rural California, Pine Flat has a structure that is informed by an extended contemplation of the artist’s young subjects, composed of twelve static ten-minute takes of children from the community at play and rest, both alone and in groups. These images of American youths in the lead-up to the inauguration of George W. Bush’s second term in office are meticulously recorded by Lockhart. These are the children of our time, those who have only ever known an America at war, New Orleans as a devastated city, and photographic as digital and malleable, not as physical material. Outside the cinema, a series of nineteen large-format photographs of children from the same community, titled Pine Flat Portrait Series (2005), extends Lockhart’s project beyond the duration of the film and, in doing so, invites the viewer to contemplate the future function of the photograph as museological object after the life of the exhibition has expired.

While the ethnographic impulse of Lockhart’s project emphasizes the role of the artist in production of the image and the deployment of the photograph in the service of an archive, elsewhere in the exhibition the photograph circulates as found image, the product of parallel histories. The presentation of work by Wolfgang Tillmans in Life on Mars is highly fragmented and encompasses a variety of modes in which the photographer is known to work, including abstraction and portraiture.
Molly Landreth

Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America

IPS gallery, Montreal
November 1 – December 20, 2008

From Barack Obama’s gay-inclusive acceptance speech to the controversial passing of the Prop. 8 ban on gay marriage, the lives of gay Americans are, for better or for worse, on the public radar in the United States. Molly Landreth moves beyond party platforms and ballot boxes, embarking on a tour of the country to produce a growing archive of queer photographic portraits, often working outside of urban gay centres, to provide a distinctive portrayal of what it means, to those who live it, to be queer in America. In this excursion, she revolts against clichéd narratives dictated by policy-makers and mainstream media and permits her lively cast to take charge of their own queer representation. Taking a cue from Robert Frank, entering into dialogues with an unpredictable ensemble both embedded in their environments and breaking free of the stereotyped lives that those environments sometimes inflict, Landreth introduces into the gallery evidence that bright lights, big city, is not always where community – or family – is formed.

Landreth’s large-format prints depict small town made suspect by conceptions of the appropriateness of certain bodies to certain backdrops. “You’re not from around here, are you?” is a euphemistic remark made to those deemed out of place in their surroundings, a passive denunciation of difference, a phrase that sometimes precedes a literal running-out-of-town. Landreth manipulates this exilic custom by choosing as subjects individuals typically made to feel like outsiders in the very places that they call home. Rustic backgrounds situate prodigious subjects as both displaced and firmly planted, her anthropological project challenging the site of romantic refuge for countless eras of American teens. In Gary and Jeremy, Brooklyn, NY, dreamy repose is on the menu for two post-adolescent boys who sit at a wood-paneled diner table, the arm of Jeremy crossed over his lap, his back hunched in humorous contrast to the reckless confidence that his wheeled footwear requires. Offsetting nuanced representations of queer life are explicit portrayals of queer and political identities of the sitters and complicating uninformered perceptions of the incompatibility of devout religious faith and politically radical identities. In Travis at Gay Skate, Glendale, CA, light-hearted awkwardness exudes from Travis, who sits off-tisk, his hands crossed over his lap, his back hunched in humorous contrast to the reckless confidence that his wheeled footwear requires. Offsetting nuanced representations of queer life are explicit portrayals of queer intimacy, such as Simon and West, SAM, Seattle, WA, in which two lovers awake to Landreth’s lens, staring unabashedly and directly ahead. Pushing past oversimplified notions of sexual and gender identities, Landreth incorporates into her series the array of bodies that comprise the realities of queer communities and partnerships, compassionately illustrating the untold ways in which they are experienced.

Landreth’s compositional style may be commonplace in photographic practice, but her portraits are nevertheless stimulating, contributing to the body of queer representation that has, arguably, yet to reach its saturation point. Indeed, in a straight world in which queer lives and the bodies that live them are rarely noted for anything other than how they deviate, Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America enters into the gallery at an opportune moment in American history, a history that, as Landreth makes clear, must stretch to accommodate the heterogeneous population that forms it. While it might still be a while before queer life in America is appreciated in all its diverse manifestations, queer audiences will perhaps be pleased by the prospect of seeing themselves reflected in the images that stare back at them.


Erin Silver is a graduate student in the Department of Art History at Concordia University. Her research is focused on queer aesthetics, collage, and radical exhibition practice.