

Whitney Biennial 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 7 – May 25, 2014

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Installation view, *Robert Heinecken: Object Matter*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2014.

photo: Jonathan Muzikar, © The Museum of Modern Art

Robert Heinecken: *Object Matter*

Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 15–June 22, 2014

Object Matter is the first retrospective of conceptual photographer Robert Heinecken's work since his death in 2006. It is a small show but rife with ideas and loaded imagery. Heinecken was a Los Angeles-based photographer who seldom used a camera, calling himself a "paraphotographer" in that his work stood outside the traditional considerations of the medium. Primarily appropriating images found in magazines, pornography, and television, he asserted the photograph as object unto itself while recontextualizing it, expanding the parameters of its accepted form and usage. His inquiry inhabited many disciplines including collage, installation, sculpture, and printmaking, all of which are represented here.

A highlight of the show is the *Are You Rea* series (1964–68), black and white "negative" photograms made from combining the front and back images of various magazines (a theme revisited in his successful *Recto/Verso* series of the late 1980s). These ghostly combinations present convincing case studies on the intersection of chance, media, consumerism and the constructed visual experience of advertising, while prefiguring the overlapping, multiple realities of our desktop digital world. Highlighting Heinecken's interest in chance arrangements is *Child Guidance Toys* (1965), wherein a found pairing of adverts highlights an image of a child pointing a rifle directly at a figurine of John F. Kennedy. An installation of over one hundred examples from both the *Periodical* and *Revised Magazine* series underscores the degree to which magazines were of abiding interest to Heinecken throughout his career. These ageing, patinated works consist of magazines that were manipulated or altered via overprinting or collage, foregrounding issues of authorship, ubiquity versus uniqueness, and the glut of media-sourced imagery.

Most of these works contain women as subject matter and though they came into being during the cultural rise of feminism, one of the show's problems is that, based on this work alone, you would never know it. However varied Heinecken's conceptual strategies and changing material investigations, they are largely exercised through the female form, objectifying it in the process. His repeated use of pornographic imagery, though tame, seems to infuse his projects with a sense of disregard for the implications of the imagery they employ. A few failures along this line would include *Lingerie for a Feminist Suntan #3 & #4* (1973) containing photo emulsion paper bras on wire hangers with female nude torsos sporting "photographic" tan-lines. Both constructions seem flippantly butch and sophomoric. Nearby, an installation of a domestic interior, *TV / Time Environment* (1970/2014), includes a television that plays programming through a female nude image, raising the inevitable questions of consumption, fetishism, and commodification but also the question "Is this critiquing institutional sexism or contributing to it?" The exhibition title playfully suggests that to Heinecken, his objects did matter while unfortunately his subjects may not have.

[Enrico Gomez]



Installation view, *Whitney Biennial 2014*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

photo: Sheldon C. Collins

Whitney Biennial 2014

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 7–May 25, 2014

Last year there was no Whitney Biennial, but the exhibition's cultural presence was felt nonetheless. Alongside a sprawling New Museum show called *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, critics and curators recalled the memories and ramifications of the influential 1993 Whitney Biennial. Dubbed in shorthand as the "identity politics biennial," the show focused explicitly on issues around gender, race, and sexuality and was summarily panned. In 2013, the '93 Biennial became historical, lauded as a brave step in museum programming that set the tenor for much American art of the 1990s.

It's hard to imagine that kind of discursive impact happening again. Barring some clever activist interventions aimed at the Whitney, the biennials have become internalist affairs arousing the attention of the Euro-American artworld and not much else. Often dominated by a canon of contemporary artists, they appeared like auction house diagnostics, save for 2012's well-received, restrained edition. 2014 has put things right back where they started: organized by a tripartite curatorial team of Anthony Elms, Stuart Comer, and Michelle Grabner, each assigned their own floor, the Whitney Biennial this year becomes not much more than a generalist catalogue, not devoid of strong work but missing the challenge and urgency of something like 1993.

Viewed as a whole, the Biennial misses the opportunity to challenge its institutional frame. Works abound in the lobby, hallways, and sculpture court, but the museum feels squarely secure as a repository of haute-commodities. Art world trends come and go with unproblematic ease (behold the complete conflation of artist, curator, and archivist roles this year). But viewed as three different floors, the exhibition does manage to register as unique parts. Grabner's floor offers the most in ways of visual allure, with a bravura central gallery bookended by Joel Otterson's opulent chandelier sculpture and Sterling Ruby's corroded ceramics. The artist's physical hand features notably for Grabner, with dedicated sections to craft and a strong grouping of female abstract painters such as Louise Fishman and Dona Nelson.

Comer relies, in short, on a bit more brand-name cachet and new media allure. He opens with Bjarne Melgaard's already infamous installation conceptually aimed at the anthropocene and its deleterious effects as summarized by images and sculptures of sex dolls, torture, monkeys copulating, and children being run over by cars, to name a few. As abject Grand Guignol, the effect is indelible, but as a political statement, it merely argues "things are bad." Elms moves toward the intimate in his presentation, which centres on plaintive understatement with some standouts like Michel Auder's lyrical video work and Paul P.'s quietly bracing ink drawings, but overall rings a tad lethargic. Elms's muted tone seems to advocate for the Biennial's primary ethos: better safe than sorry.

[Joseph Henry]