

IRVING PENN: RECENT WORKS WALL LABEL

Graphic and photographic beauty are not surprising qualities in the work of Irving Penn, but the pictures seen here explicate these virtues with a richness, confidence, and virtuosity that are unmatched in his earlier work.

Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that these qualities have become, unambiguously, the content of the pictures. The capricious and frankly inconsequential nature of the nominal subject matter, in conjunction with its ambitious and enormously sophisticated handling, constitute a clear statement of intention: these photographs can be considered only as works of art.

It might therefore seem that the new pictures represent a break with Penn's work of the past, but it is more likely that they represent a further advance - in terms of a richer medium and a more appropriate iconography - toward the goal that Penn has pursued throughout his career: a perfect, poised, and self-sufficient photograph.

A photographer can take either of two positions toward the piece of paper that bears his work. He can try to make it either beautiful or invisible. During the past fifty years most photographers of high talent have elected to regard the photographic print as a transparency: a window that the viewer might be deceived to look through, as though into a real space. (The mature work of Edward Weston defined this ideal in perhaps its purest terms.)

In recent years however some photographers have begun to look with increasing sympathy at the prints of their Edwardian grandfathers, some of the best of which are less like windows than tapestries - physical objects which are present and satisfying in visceral terms. The platinum print, with its exceptional richness and subtlety of scale and surface, was a favored medium

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for photographers who pursued this goal, but perhaps no earlier master exploited these potentials with the breathtaking skill evident in these prints by Penn.

It would seem that a concern for the independent aesthetic potentials of the photographic print is more common among photographers who, like Penn, have worked seriously in ink. Modern photographic papers are not in themselves beautiful; their hard mechanical surfaces suggest chemical factories and petroleum by-products. A photographer makes them work by making them ethereal, as an architect uses plate glass. In comparison, ink and paper, even on the level of the primitive woodblock, or that of the modern high speed rotary press, have an intrinsic physical status that suggests richer and more sophisticated possibilities.

There may also be a relationship between a photographer's definition of quality in the print and his attitude toward his subject matter: the more important the subject itself is intended to seem, the more transparent and anonymous the print. Conversely, to the degree that the subject matter is the occasion (rather than the reason) for the picture, the print is free to express independent concerns. In Penn's case, one might guess that he has only rarely enjoyed more than a cursory interest in the nominal subjects of his pictures. For him the true subject has been not haute couture or cuisine, but line, tone, shape, and pattern, and the photographic intuition that will define their just relationship.

-- John Szarkowski

The photographs are untitled, and were made between 1972-74. All are lent by the photographer. The Museum of Modern Art gratefully acknowledges the support of its exhibition program by the New York State Council on the Arts.