

The Museum of Modern Art

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CALIFORNIA PHOTOGRAPHY: REMAKING MAKE-BELIEVE

June 29 - August 20, 1989

A concise survey of recent photographic work by seven artists who live and work in California opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 29, 1989.

CALIFORNIA PHOTOGRAPHY: REMAKING MAKE-BELIEVE represents three generations of photographers who have taken a leading role in the development, since the 1960s, of synthetic and conceptual approaches to the medium. These artists have challenged traditional ideas about purist or "straight" photography, especially its right to claim a special access to truth.

On view through August 20, the exhibition has been organized by Susan Kismaric, curator, Department of Photography. It includes approximately forty-five works made within the last five years by John Baldessari, Nancy Barton, Jo Ann Callis, John Divola, Robert Heinecken, Larry Johnson, and Larry Sultan. Their work is characterized by deadpan humor and the influence of Hollywood films.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Ms. Kismaric writes, "California culture has been dominated by the film and television industries, and it is not surprising that movies and ideas about representation directly influence its visual arts. The work of these seven artists reflects the theatricality and artifice, saturated color, and fragmentation of narrative and time found in film."

CALIFORNIA PHOTOGRAPHY explores several factors that influenced the development of a synthetic photographic style that has come to define the essence of contemporary California photography. In California during the 1960s and 1970s, the move away from the restrictions of "straight" photography was

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compounded by the relative lack of museum exhibitions and photographic magazines shaping the development of the medium on the East Coast.

Photographic education in the state was an equally significant factor. A restructuring of the curriculum of art schools led to new interdisciplinary activities which encouraged a sharing of materials, methods, and ideas. The power of photography to create social, political, and cultural meanings became the predominant subject. Finally, the authority of film and television, and even the physical landscape of the state itself, lent a powerful influence to the evolution of the medium.

The proponents of the "straight" photograph, who dominated fine-art photography through the 1950s, believed it imperative to show the world clearly, directly, and in an unembellished manner. At the same time, the public, fascinated with the photograph's fidelity, took it for granted that the camera could describe daily events, when in fact its ability to do so was limited. In the 1950s, the photographic essays that appeared in Life magazine epitomized the public's willingness to be persuaded by photography. By the 1960s, television and movies had skewed notions of reality even further by representing ideal standards against which people measured their lives.

"Documentary" films seen on television in the early 1970s, however, showed the Vietnam War in a way that seemed at odds with the conflict. A new-found skepticism about the veracity of photographic description took hold. The photograph's inability to convey accurately the experience of daily life precipitated a deliberate, radical reconsideration of conventional ideas about what a photograph might look like. Ms. Kismaric writes, "The reliability of the straight photograph as a purveyor of fact, and the reliance on the purist aesthetic as a guiding principle of fine-art photography, were eventually undermined....The photograph as a transparent window to the world was replaced by a mediated, self-conscious construction."

Within the synthetic photographic style that emerged in California, photography is applied to other art forms and combined with images from other mediums. The subject is either constructed or appropriated, and the work is usually executed in the studio. In constructed pictures, the photographer creates or arranges the objects to be photographed, directs people in a narrative tableau, or reuses found images.

Divola, for example, takes pictures of the real world, which he has altered through colorful lighting, then juxtaposes two such pictures in a diptych to create a new meaning. Callis sculpts ordinary objects such as chairs in clay, arranges the sculptures in tableaux with other objects, paints the backdrops, and photographs her construction. Johnson uses the medium to make an image of language he has appropriated and arranged on various backgrounds.

Some of the artists employ photography to debunk the myths and illusions the medium helps create. They accomplish this by departing from an emphasis on the single photograph--by using pictures in a sequence or group--and by using language or text with the photographic image. Baldessari incorporates sections of movie stills and found photographs, Heineken appropriates tearsheets from fashion magazines, Sultan uses his family's home movies, and Barton recreates original posters used to advertise operas. The use of representations of the world or artifacts of our culture in works of art allows for new insights about their significance and a recognition of their shaping influence on our lives.

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