

Sharon Mizota, "Hard truths underline Robert Heinecken exhibition at Hammer," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2014.

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Review Hard truths underline Robert Heinecken exhibition at Hammer



"Multiple Solution Puzzle" is among works in the Hammer Museum's tribute to Robert Heinecken. (Hammer Museum)

By **SHARON MIZOTA**

The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths," wrote artist Bruce Nauman, in neon. At the time, in 1967, it probably seemed more like a question. Artists increasingly had turned away from the heroic pursuit of truth and beauty to explore more quotidian subjects and materials. Composed almost entirely of advertising images and porn, the work of Robert Heinecken could hardly be described as "mystic," and yet it cuts to hard truths with savage intensity.

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Recto/Verso #2. 1988. Silver dye bleach print, 8 5/8 x 7 7/8" (21.9 x 20 cm). (Hammer Museum)

Heinecken, who died in 2006, was an important figure in the postwar L.A. art scene. He founded the photography program at UCLA in 1963 and taught there until 1991. Since a retrospective at LACMA in 2000, his legacy has been explored here only in smaller venues. The current exhibition at the Hammer Museum, "Robert Heinecken: Object Matter," is a timely, focused tribute originally organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Never content within the established boundaries of photography, Heinecken often referred to himself as a "para-photographer," indicating that his work was about photography, not just of it. Foreshadowing the appropriation art of the Pictures generation, his images were skimmed from the surfaces of 20th century media — mostly magazines and television — and they often skewered the hypocrisy and dehumanization of consumer society.

An early example is "Child Guidance Toys" from 1965. It is a stark black-and-white transparency of an advertisement Heinecken came across after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. On the left side, a boy aims a toy rifle; on the right is an image of a JFK doll. Although the products are separate, the rifle seems to point directly at the president. Heinecken's simple act of appropriation is a succinct, stunning comment on our deeply ingrained culture of violence.

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Cybill Shepherd/Phone Sex. 1992. Dye bleach print on foamcore, 63 x 17" (160 x 43.2 cm). (Hammer Museum)

As any good American knows, violence and sex go hand in hand, and nothing says "sex" more clearly than a naked lady. Much of Heinecken's work makes use of pinups, pornography or underwear advertising. In a group of photo collages and three-dimensional, puzzle-like sculptures from the 1960s, the artist arranged close-up shots of naked, female body parts into undulating, all-over abstractions or shapes that suggest flowers or landscapes. In the case of "Breast/Bomb #5" from 1967, the body parts coalesce into a curving, wave-like protrusion that is beautiful, surreal and also somewhat (subversively) phallic.

Although the slicing and dicing of the female form is an act of violence itself, the endless reconfiguration of the pieces effectively disrupts the images' original intent: to arouse desire. The puzzles and collages are an early example of Heinecken's overall project to trouble the smooth contours of popular media.

Later works are more pointed. In "Cliché Vary/Fetishism" from 1974, he again divides a seductive female body into gridded segments but has augmented the photographic image with hand-drawn, X-ray views of the model's bones, and the outlines of a brassiere. The result is a traditional conflation of sex and death, but also a deadpan dissection of the body's and the image's "supports."

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Also on view are some of the artist's best-known works, the brilliant series "Are You Rea?" created between 1964-68 and a good selection of his impishly altered magazines, which he continued to make over the course of his career. The former use actual pages from publications like *Life* and *Time* as negatives to create a serendipitous, sometimes caustic layering of images from the front and back of each page. The latter employ strategic cutouts, over-printing and reassembly to highlight clashing realities. A spread from 1993's "Life in the Time of War" pairs a photo of a grieving soldier in desert camouflage with one of a sultry swimsuit model wearing a similarly patterned bikini.

Sometimes Heinecken would leave these "periodicals" in waiting rooms, or put them back on the newsstand, where perhaps they functioned as tiny ideological bombs. Not content to comment from the safe confines of the art world, he hoped to create small dissonances in everyday life too.



Are You Rea #1. 1964-68. Gelatin silver print, 10 13/16 x 7 7/8" (27.4 x 20cm). t (Robert Wedemeyer / Hammer Museum)

The highlight of the exhibition, however, is a work that points to a central conundrum of Heinecken's role as a photographer. Stretching across three walls, the 1984 multi-panel piece "A Case Study in Finding an Appropriate TV Newswoman (A CBS Docudrama in Words and Pictures)" is a fictional account of CBS' search for the perfect female newscaster. Again using the grid format augmented with text, Heinecken presents

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successive trios of images, shot off the television screen. Each group depicts a prospective female anchor, her male counterpart and a composite image of the two of them. The detailed narrative relates the search for the perfect combination of sexiness, friendliness, race and age, and assumes that these characteristics can be discerned from facial features.

The piece is a scathing indictment of the triviality of contemporary media and concludes with a text invoking the resurgence of physiognomy, the pseudo-science that claimed character traits could be read in physical features. The text notes that physiognomy and photography emerged at the same time in the late 1880s and that basic physiognomic principles are "inexorably bound to the belief systems about photography — and to all its commercial media step-children."

The statement feels despairing; photography is only a play of surfaces, and our media culture is an exercise in superficiality. Yet within this bleak worldview, Heinecken devoted his career to the only "mystic truth" worth revealing: that we must be continually jolted out of our passivity.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-heinecken-hammer-review-20141122-story.html>