

Petzel

ROBERT HEINECKEN

I Am Involved in Learning to Perceive and Use Light

May 15 – June 28, 2014

Opening reception: Thursday, May 15th, 6-8pm



Petzel Gallery is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of work by Robert Heinecken (1931 – 2006). In lieu of a press release, below is an essay written by Heinecken in 1974 that has served as the organizing basis of this show, which is organized by the Robert Heinecken Trust. Concurrently, the retrospective “Robert Heinecken: *Object Matter*,” curated by Eva Respini, is on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through September 7, 2014.

“I Am Involved in Learning to Perceive and Use Light”

I feel that a particular set of circumstances and conditions exist around my work and sense that this is more or less true of the work of other individuals as well. Holding the intention that this writing may pertain to a rather wide range of extrinsic applications, I choose not to attempt to augment or clarify or, in fact, limit its meaning by the inclusion of illustrations. The foundation of anything I try to verbalize in relation to my work is rooted to my belief in the concept and value of the on-going evolution of one’s personal vision as evidenced by formal expression.

If items are being produced independent of specific extrinsic function—and if their appearances lie outside of popular taste—and if their meaning are poetically structured—and if they tend not to elicit relevant societal feedback—and if they do not seem to have potential for sales—then their value to the individual maker must be attached to the intrinsic relationships that exist between those items and themselves. It is often difficult to sustain desire and motivation and energy in the face of indifference, unless one understands the actual organic nature of aesthetic process and then secondly, the relationship of that process to existence.

Initially we run because of our legs. Subsequently we are told to run between lines against intellectual and emotional ideas, thereby examining and perceiving time. Later still, encouraged to run in circles against age, we lose interest. The truth is to run each time in relation to the distinct qualities of that wind, and to the personal sensations of resistance.

My basic tenet is relatively simple. To relate the former to the future, the last to the next. By continuing to utilize certain constant structural forms, intellectual ideas and emotional states. I explore the potential of the resulting images as expressional vehicles. Put in simple language—I make something to see what it looks like and to see if it looks like anything else.

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I have stated elsewhere that I don't sense a vertical development *per se* in art, rather, only the lateral development of new artists who hold new precepts about what art is, or can be. It is not progress, but growth—and I separate, or even divorce, these two terms. Personally, I continue to experience uneven cycles which are combinations of a period of confused stasis, a period of productive ideation, a period of energetic resolution, followed by stasis, etc. Sometimes that fulfilled pattern takes a day, and sometimes a year. The frequency of resolution makes no sense except when viewed in light of those particular circumstances which accelerate and modify and intensify behavior.

I recall a span of about 3-4 years when a range of factors came together to cause a very interesting and productive period for me. First, I found myself in contact with a group of graduate students who were very challenging, very bright and very committed. Second, a colleague who acted as a fine catalyst on me. Third, a personal life which was producing heightened emotional states and tensions. Additionally, the stimulus of other places and other spaces was meaningful. And finally the special re-discovery of sexuality. All of this combined with a set of visual ideas which were fortunately very open-ended and viable.

The work which resulted was a true organism. It was not the identity of these component factors or individuals which was important, but the exact composition, union and assimilation of those factors. Perhaps less important but relevant, was the climate of potential professional acceptance which I began to experience.

The camera or the resulting print as a witness to visual experience is simply not present as a precept in my work. I use the camera as a tool for gathering or recording or copying, but not on a conscious experimental level. However, I do think of the picture/object as a symbolic equivalent for experience, or fantasy or imagination.

I am interested in what I term *gestalts*; picture circumstances which bring together disparate images or ideas so as to form new meanings and new configurations. Often this involves the integration of words and typographic elements. In this vein, it is the incongruous, the ironic and the satirical which interest me, particularly in socio/political or sexual/erotic contexts. I sometimes visualize myself as a bizarre guerrilla, investing in a kind of humorous warfare in which a series of minimal, direct, invented acts result in a maximum extrinsic effect, but without consistent rationale. I might liken it to the intention of making police photographs in which there is no crime involved—but with that assumption.

The methods and process characteristics of the photographic medium fascinate me, especially in relation to all kinds of unconventional light sensitive materials, and combinations. In the work, I am involved in a constant redefinition of the implied boundaries of what photography is, for me. Not just in relation to media extensions, but idea extensions as well.

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The following are a series of rather loosely connected (and briefly described) personal thoughts, ideas, and interests which hopefully will add up to a description of my working premise and attitudes. These factors determine the appearance and content of my work and collectively define its difference from other photographic work.

I visualize the entire history and range of photographic image possibilities as a kind of 3 dimensional continuum with barely discernible and intermittent demarcation points. I am more interested in those distinctions of motive, temperament and idea than in groupings of chronology, process, or generalized appearances. As an example, I find it interesting to try to understand and relate Les Krims' photographs to the 19th century allegorical illustrations by J.M. Cameron. And then both of those to Curtis' theatrical photographs of the American Indians. Or on another level, Fred Sommers' assemblages of the 1940s to the European photo montage work of 20 years earlier. And those to the writings of Robbe-Grillet.

All of it has to do with the particular illusion inherent in the photographic medium. The physical and temperamental point at which the deception takes place is different in each of the above examples but the image idea and my subjective response to it seems constant.

One tends to assume certain things about conventional photographs. Even with a sophisticated understanding of the high degree of abstraction involved, and the knowledge of the discrete and pointed differences between vision and perception or experience and image, the lens-formed picture remains our current model for accuracy of rendition. In spite of an awareness of inferred time and motion, as in cinema or video, the basic similarity between what one sees with his eyes in nature, and what one sees in a photograph is striking. This is especially true if effective cultural conditioning has been present. My mother (b. 1895) still says Kodak when she means camera and photographic when she means realistic. In the same way, and because of the same kind of conditioning, I (b. 1931) say picture instead of image and television rather than video tape.

Typically we see the photographic image as a complete and total one, and therefore strangely correct; automatically resolved in terms of the disposition of objects in space, rational scale reduction, more or less correct translation from color to value and probably most important, rational depiction of ordinary time, place and subject.

In most well done (or well seen) conventional photographs, it seems to be the *selection* of the particular combinational relationships of the above inherent lenticular ingredients which determines quality. I feel that I am involved in the application of these same factors and principles not as they are found/selected, but as they are synthesized or produced additively. What I begin to respond to in dealing with manipulated or synthesized photographic work is not really a refusal of the importance of these given factors but a kind of impatience with the rationality of their lens structure and heritage, and their seeming completeness.

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I have an appreciation and a sincere interest in accepting and extending these same characteristics in the context of a synthesized facture rather than in an analytics or selected one. The presence of residual photographic illusions/reality (rational time, space, volume etc.) as they function in the separate elements of a synthesized image or object, is as important as it is in an entire, selected one. It may be similar to a comparison between igneous, as opposed to aggregate, geological formations. In any conglomerate object, structural dichotomy is intrinsic, and therefore, at least from my standpoint, extrinsic resolution and restructuring on a formal level is imperative. Therein exists the challenge of this work. I think I understand when I hear the word “subject matter” defined, but become confused and more interested when I invent the term “object matter”.

In addition to the specific lenticular characteristic mentioned above, other properties of the medium present themselves to me as interesting predicaments if not dilemmas, and hence working ideas.

The surface of photographic paper is strangely uniform and resistant. The silver image seems to be on the surface or even top of it, floating and dislocated from its base. The evidence of pressure, even slight (as now, writing with a pencil) or deeply bonded as in etching, is missing. The experience of physically imposing or imbedding the mark in the materials is not felt. Each time I look at a photographic print, I can not escape asking myself “Are those induced black shapes floating on white paper, or erased white shapes emerging from black paper?”

Color, in a color photograph, seems to remain descriptive and identificational rather than functioning psychologically or spacially or expressionally as it can do when added to black and white or monotone prints. Or especially when used as the initial pigment as in gum printing and blue printing or as the ink color in etching, lithography or gravure. Additionally, the chemically induced colors of photographic materials are not only unique and beautiful, but inherent and spontaneous.

The volume of 3-dimensional objects as typically depicted by the camera lens is of course an illusion of volume, and when actual volume or dimension is played against that flat illusion, its space becomes beautifully ambiguous.

Scale or size in conventional photography has tended to be kept small because of the rather questionable canon that a fine pattern of grain is desirable. Grain size in a picture seems relevant only to the distances involved in viewing it. The history and presence of albums and books have perhaps tended to limit and condition ideas of appropriate scale in the medium. Exhibition space and controlled light rather than page size seem relevant as the context for a good deal of my work.

Superimpositional and negative (reversed) and combinational methods seem to me to be innate to the photographic process. The fact that light initially causes density and hence a reversed image, seems relevant. The fact that the emulsion is on a transparent base seems important. The fact that the emulsion can be applied to almost any surface seems like a gift.

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The kind of delicacy and the exquisite strange volumetric appearances of the photogram have incredible potential. The opportunity for photographic appearances and subtleties to coexist with free associations and open ended synthesized configurations, is rich.

Serialism and systems relating to serial thinking are of special interest to me, as are aleatory propositions. I utilize them in the work but often on sub-structural or formative levels which tends to keep their visibility submerged.

All of the above possibilities have even higher potential when I consider their unavailability in the human optical system and hence their possible appropriateness to the human picturing system. I am not so concerned with the photographic medium as a smooth rectangular window out, but as a variously shaped and surfaced vehicle in.

My most recent work has to do with the use of various light sensitive materials themselves, and reflections about the medium itself, often disassociated from my typical image concerns. These ideas are now surfacing and are in stages of being collected, assimilated and produced.

I have always respected and in a sense marveled at a succinct and germane statement which I believe is Minor White's. In it, he makes the beautiful distinction between learning to be a photographer versus learning to photograph. I like to feel that I am involved in a further discussion— learning to perceive and use light.”

Robert F. Heinecken
University of California
Los Angeles
April, 1974

Petzel Gallery is located at 456 West 18th Street New York, NY 10011. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM. For press inquiries, please contact Andrew Black at andrew@petzel.com, or call (212) 680-9467.