



Jan Tichy at the Museum of Contemporary Photography | Art review

"1979:1–2012:21" revisits the MoCP's collection

By Lauren Weinberg

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With almost 500 prints, Dorothea Lange—the photographer whose *Migrant Mother* became an icon of the Great Depression—is the most represented artist in the Museum of Contemporary Photography's collection. The museum's largest piece is Chinese artist Shi Guorui's *Shanghai 22–23 Oct 2005*, a camera-obscura photograph of the Shanghai skyline that is more than 12' long. Its smallest, Walker Evans's untitled 1928–29 photo of a metal grate, is a mere 1" x 1.25".

Until "1979:1–2012:21: Jan Tichy Works with the MoCP Collection" took the measure of the museum's holdings, visitors had little sense the MoCP owns almost 11,000 photographs, videos and other works. But this ingenious exhibition hints at the nature and broad scope of these assets, while reminding visitors that any collection is skewed by personal taste—and luck: Lange's work came to the museum from her stepdaughter, who lives in Chicago.

Last year, Tichy, a Chicago artist who teaches at SAIC, began working to make the MoCP's collection more accessible. Aided by graduate photography students from local schools, he revamped the museum's website, making it easy to search the archive by artist, keyword and medium. He transformed the MoCP's large windows at the southwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Harrison Street into the new Cornerstone Gallery, where flat-screen monitors flash digital exhibitions organized by guest curators.

Tichy also contributes videos of his own to “1979:1–2012:21,” which are unfortunately outshone by the photographs he highlights. However, this show convinces viewers that curating can be an artistic pursuit.

The title, which refers to the museum’s first and most recent acquisitions, reflects the structure of its first section. Tichy pairs several photographs, including Shi’s and Evans’s, based on the collection’s extremes. Others are linked by form or subject matter. Tichy’s choices demonstrate that conceptual and documentary photographs coexist in the collection, which encompasses abstractions as well as images of people, landscapes and infrastructure. One of my favorite pairings pits the tough teens in Diane Arbus’s *Two Girls in Matching Bathing Suits, Coney Island, N.Y.* (1967) against the more vulnerable-looking subject of Rineke Dijkstra’s portrait *Maya, Herzliya, Israel, November 21, 1999*, offering two different but equally striking views of young womanhood.

On the mezzanine level, Tichy presents a dozen “significant yet relatively under-used” photographs recommended by museum staff who have worked with the collection for at least five years. Chicago-based Terry Evans’s lovely but disturbing color photo *Field Museum, swan, 1891* (2001) captures the taxidermied bird bent double, its graceful neck wrapped to its body with translucent fabric. It hangs near Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van Der Zee’s regal portrait of *A Member of Garvey’s African Legion with His Family* (1924). I wish Tichy had shared the MoCP employees’ explanations for their recommendations, but in choosing these 12 from a larger pool, he subsumes them into his curatorial and conceptual vision.

Local photographers—including Chicago School leaders Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan, their influential students Ken Josephson and Barbara Crane, and younger contemporary artists such as Jason Lazarus—are ubiquitous in “1979:1–2012:21.” Tichy fills the Print Study Room with a salon-style selection from Changing Chicago, a 1987 initiative that commissioned 33 hometown photographers to document the city. Their explorations of race and class couldn’t be more timely. By excavating the MoCP’s archives, Tichy renders them more relevant than ever before.