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What's So Contemporary about Photography at Yale

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When Richard "Chip" Benson called me last July to ask if I would be interested in teaching a history of photography lecture course at Yale, I wavered. I can see why I should have: I had recently moved from London to New York and I had a nagging feeling that I might have brought a parochial and too Euro-relevant sensibility with me, and what better way to get a measure of this than contact with some fine Yale minds. I was beginning to abstractly map out my next book about contemporary photography, and teaching forces out of me the inklings and rethinking that are absolutely necessary to turn ideas into arguments. Teaching cuts to the chase; students will lift an idea and give it life and energy or it will sink like a stone. On top of this, the course would be open to undergraduates and graduates from Yale University and the School of Art. The prospect of sharing this time with young people who are of this time *and* whose attitudes toward photography and its history would be pretty diverse was enticing.

I wavered when Chip called me because I know how hard it is for any institution to live up to a promise to be genuinely interested in the scope of any contemporary medium. All institutions move forward with the safety net of its "precedents." What a gloriously institutional word that is. "There are no precedents for this" is how an institution politely yet firmly says "no" to its potential for pluralism and change. There was something else. The Yale University School of Art M.F.A. photography program—it's feted. A handful of students each year are picked and lifted into the inflated bubble of contemporary art every year. This, potentially, changes what it is to come to study. At a time when leaving a photography program is closer to entering a lottery or a stock exchange than an entry into a life of art-making, my wavering was also about coming to teach students whose motivations seemed careerist.

At the end of an inspiring semester at Yale, I am glad that I did not allow my reservations to get the better of me. I am glad because I came across many contemporary attitudes to photography at Yale that are far from institutionalized or opportunistic. I say "attitudes" because so much of the contemporary energy for photography being generated at Yale revolves around the medium's history. Yale has wonderful collections of photographs, principally at the Yale University Art Gallery and at Beinecke and Sterling

Fig. 1. Tim Davis, M.F.A. 2001, *Profil Perdu*, from *Permanent Collection*, 2003. Chromogenic print, 35.2 x 27.3 cm. Gift of Tim Davis. 2003.146.2. Courtesy Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York.

libraries. I, along with my students, had the spine-tingling pleasure of spending time with many exquisite and culturally revealing photographs from these collections. It is not only Yale's curators' generosity in giving physical access to the photographs they care for but their intellectual knowledge and enthusiasm that supply Yale's vital atmosphere. More than this, there is a genuine openness on the part of these collections' keepers to how their visitors want to analyze the works. Perhaps this sounds strange—how could an institution control what you think about a photograph? But that is precisely what many collection climates are imbued with. One of the most developed senses of Yale's commitment to having contemporary meaning made of its historic collections was shown, for me, in the amazing program of debates and lectures that Yale's Photographic Memory Workshop coordinates. This group breathes contemporary issues into Yale's collections and gives a profound sense of the diasporas and social values that shaped modern and contemporary America, retrieved from Yale's acid-free archive storage. This commitment by Yale does not mean, of course, that "history" becomes "histories," or contemporary critique is prized over connoisseurship, but that the dynamic of contemporary discussion about photography is more radical than is visible from the surface.

Alongside of this openness to interpretation, I want you to take my word that Yale is a place where modernist, postmodernist, post-postmodernist attitudes coexist. You are just as likely to bump into an advocate of photography as a craft and a vocation with its own standards and history as you are a believer in photography as just one of the mediums from which an artist can pick, regardless of skill or adherence to photography's past, to communicate an idea. There are those at Yale that mourn the end of photography's self-contained infrastructure of theory, writing, and galleries, while others aim for and navigate the place for photography within the more glittering realm of contemporary art. This almost bizarre lack of a party line is played out in Yale's teaching and collections. At Yale's M.F.A. program critiques, for instance, the to-ing and fro-ing between Yale's professors and visiting critics and these different versions of making photographs is legendary. Despite my own iconoclastic tendencies, I've come to appreciate that what happens at the University is its version of the very nature of photography and how it draws us in to obsess and enjoy the medium. We arrive from all walks of life via the almost serendipitous routes of the first photographs that made us realize there is more to this than clicking the shutter. We comprehend the possibilities of photography through more than one notion of what it is, and has been, to create photographically. Ultimately, Yale's accommodation of thinkers and practitioners who take different stances on what version of photography enables and encourages contemporary practice offers the possibility for students to work within more than one school of thought.

It is in this spirit that the Yale University Art Gallery has been actively acquiring photographs that are genuine reflections of contemporary photography at large as well as offering a capsule collection from its M.F.A. photography program. Archives that have depth as well as range allow for students and educators to thoroughly ground themselves in photography in their own ways. The desire to have Yale's collections reflect study and contemporary interest contributes incalculably to the energy around photography at Yale. One of the positive outcomes of photography's cultural popularity over the past fifteen years is that it is easier to make the case for such collections to be developed, to actively rather than passively receive new photography acquisitions. The Yale University Art Gallery under the directorship of Jock Reynolds has made some wise decisions, such as acquiring Robert Adams's *Master Sets*. This incredible archive simultaneously promotes and enables academic study of

photography at Yale. It is also beginning to be visible in the Art Gallery's publishing program of its support to artists, like, most recently, Judith Joy Ross, who have been unforgivably overlooked within the official history of photography. Initiatives such as these are the sane approach during a period when the popularity of collecting photography went, frankly, insane. During the past fifteen years, amid the rise in the numbers and types of individual and private collectors of photography, curators of university and museum collections have had to rethink their realistic aims. Most publicly accessible collections' acquisition budgets cannot withstand the open market for both historical and contemporary photographs. As part of this reasoned exile from the meteoric rise in the photography print market, museums and galleries building upon historical photography collections have tended to look away from the most high-profile contemporary artists-using-photography. The Yale University Art Gallery is far from alone in finding alternatives to collecting single works by photography's art luminaries such as Andreas Gursky or Jeff Wall, knowing that this would come at the expense of being able to house in perpetuity individual photographers' archives or collections carefully and imaginatively compiled by private collectors.

How Yale's, or any actively studied, collection represents the most contemporary uses of photography is, perhaps, the most complex area in which to attempt to make acquisitions policy. The labor and potential cost of convincingly representing the range and the numbers of photographers that now constitute contemporary art photography make doing so an impossibility. Even if it were practicably possible to shape a collection of prints that embodies contemporary, global manifestations of photography, the gesture of recognizing a medium currently driven by many within a modernist collecting history that acknowledges merely a few practitioners is potentially contradictory and self-defeating. The unintentional by-product of institutions collecting the work of a relatively few, and new, art photographers is that they signpost for the cv-conscious art market the artists worth investing in. Although an institution may not be intending to speculate on the art stars of tomorrow, photography's art market will definitely take its cue to do so from any early acquisition of a young photographer's work by a museum or gallery. What such an institution as the Art Gallery chooses to lift out of the ebb and flow of the immediate production of photography has significance beyond its commitment to new artists (and new art). It is almost an art-world sport to attend graduate shows, including those at Yale, to make low (financial) risk speculations on tomorrow's rising stars. The Art Gallery does acquire works from the University's M.F.A. alumni (the medium's recent history would be significantly poorer without them) but in a way that perhaps seems colder and less sporting than much collecting of graduate art work. The Art Gallery does not exploit its direct line of communication with the School of Art's graduates; rather, it has the sense to follow what happens after commencement—to allow these newly public artists a period of pure critical silence after the critiques and hand-holding of school have ended. Like all confident institutions, its interest and belief in the talents that it has played a role in shaping extend well beyond its initial or obvious impact as a place of study. The Yale University Art Gallery's acquisition of its photography M.F.A. alumni is invariably an astute marker of some of the strongest new voices in contemporary art photography. Among the Art Gallery's most significant acquisitions of contemporary photography are works by Tim Davis and An-My Lê.

Some are born great, others have greatness thrust upon them, and I suspect that photographer and poet Tim Davis arrived pretty fully formed at Yale. Davis is, according to Yale's apocryphal history, the graduate student who argued against and disputed the critiques that were offered for his two years

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Fig. 2. Tim Davis, M.F.A. 2001, *The Oarsmen*, from *Permanent Collection*, 2003. Chromogenic print, 38.4 x 55.6 cm. Gift of Tim Davis. 2003.146.1. Courtesy Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York.

of work. That independent, idiosyncratic approach to making photographs as art was part of the breath of fresh air that entered the art world in the 2000s. Davis's artist's statement of 2001, still crisp in the Arts of the Book archive, has the very same poetic yet critical prose style that accompanies the photographs in his recent book *My Life in Politics*. The text bridges his engagement with and comment on contemporary America while disarmingly reminding us of the absolute joy of making visual sense from what is all around us. Davis's *Retail* series shows empty homes (some in New Haven) in which the fluorescent signs of fast food and shopping outlets are reflected on window panes—a blast of synthetic color upon each nighttime scene and a visualization of the usually unseen contamination of our private lives within late capitalism.

Davis's *Permanent Collection* series (figs. 1 and 2) is similarly exploring an intriguing observation; this time directed to the actual visual experience of viewing art. In his photographs of details from oil paintings, it is the oh-so-familiar actuality of viewing art that is serially singled out by Davis. The obliteration or distortion of the paintings' figurative subjects and the distortion on the shiny surfaces created by spotlight glares take center stage in *Permanent Collection*, playfully turning traditional paintings (via photography) into Minimalistic abstractions. Each of Davis's bodies of work looks different. This is an obvious yet important point to make in the contemporary climate for making art photography. Rather than his sensibility being bound up with a "signature" style, it is found in his matching a visual approach to each of his ideas. This is confident art making cuts against a general preference for artists whose work is consistently, easily recognized, but this is also a form of photographic practice that is finding greater acceptance as the art world understands the medium better.

A parallel, highly attuned way of working seems to be very much part of the message of An-My Lê's *Small Wars* series (figs. 3 and 4), some of which has recently been acquired by Yale University Art Gallery. An-My Lê graduated from the Yale M.F.A. program in 1993, and perhaps the only obvious connection between her graduation photographs and *Small Wars* is her continued use of black-and-white photography. Lê's adoption of the traditional, truth-value-laden medium of black and white consciously refers to photography's history but is far from a straight mimicry of historical style or the act of a would-be heir apparent to photography's monochrome heritage. The very idea of using a now-rarefied language of black and white to comment on warfare is highly charged. Her work intelligently cites the earliest war photography—of Roger Fenton's depiction of the aftermath and the rest between military assaults by the British at the Crimean War or the more graphic portrayal of America's Civil War by George Barnard. The tallying of the slowed-down momentum of photography in the contemporary era with its nineteenth-century forebears is manifest most obviously in Lê's use of a large-format camera. This is hardly new territory for contemporary art photography, where it has for at least fifteen years been a strategy to play down the speed of photography in favor of seemingly more measured or contemplative tempos. But Lê's use of a technologically historic form of photography is not casual use of a now-convention; it is a pertinent use of a version of photography that evokes the past. The photographs in *Small Wars*, at first glance, look like battles and scenes of daily life from historic wars. In a way, they are inasmuch as Lê has photographed recent Vietnam War reenactments staged in North Carolina and Virginia. Just as the "battles" she depicts are reconstructions of its actors' memories and fantasies, Lê uses a soon-to-be-defunct version of photography for its representation. Her photographs bring us invitingly close to the practicalities of organized violence while simultaneously (especially given the burning into our consciousness of the amateur digital souvenirs of the violations of human rights at the Abu Ghraib detention center) suggesting the void between the photographic expectation and reality of war. In addition, besides representing a compelling contemporary vision within the Art Gallery's collection, Lê's sentient approach to the remembrance of the Vietnam War provides a dialogue with another of the Gallery's recent acquisitions—a portfolio of Larry Burrows's iconic color reportage of the war carried out between 1962 and 1971, as well as drawings, currently on loan to the Gallery, that Maya Lin submitted in 1980 as a Yale undergraduate to accompany her winning proposal for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The Yale University Art Gallery is taking other important steps to acknowledge the strength of its alumni's photography, acquiring work by three very recent graduates: Angela Strassheim, John Lehr, and Anthony Lepore. Strassheim graduated in 2003 with an extraordinarily full portfolio of work that showed the breadth and extent of her journey while at Yale. There are photographs that are heavily staged, violent dramas enacted by her friends and willing cast of "actors," unnervingly poised portraits of her family, and hyper-still interiors and still-lifes made in mortuaries (while Strassheim worked as a forensic photographer). A few photographs have made it into her post-M.F.A. body of work that combine her attention to photographic detail with her ability to shape subtle, tense visual dramas. There is a pivotal photograph (fig. 5) found in the Arts of the Book archive; a young woman is shown lying sprawled, naked, on a bed. Perhaps unconscious or asleep, the figure is pale and vomit-stained—the vantage point of the camera at her feet is as if we are entering the room and happening upon this unsettling scene. Strassheim's photographs can also carry a more abstract version of this ability to coolly, clearly present a scene. Her

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depiction of a girl at a window (fig. 6) is visually seductive—even pretty—but with the psychological sting of the uncanny as the child's identity and state of mind is obscured from us. The biography of Strassheim for her first solo exhibitions and inclusion in this year's Whitney Biennial refer to her initial training in forensic and biomedical photography. This biographical fact too easily gets read as an analytical morbidity rather than as what it is more accurately: a desire to picture the unspoken, silent logic of the realities of her encounters. Strassheim's initial training involved intense photographic scrutiny that has meant that she was less encumbered than many M.F.A. students by a gap between an idea and ability to realize it photographically. But this is merely a skill that, without the motivations that she has to explore the slippages and combinations of fact and fiction, and the blatant and unseen, would not so soundly resonate with contemporary art photography's discourses.

The development of John Lehr's *Sound & Fury* series (figs. 7 and 8) was well and truly routed, parallel to Strassheim, in his Yale M.F.A. work. His architectural and observational photographs are extremely ambitious; hinging on entering into a fertile dialogue with the rich history of postwar photography and aiming to make a personal and investigative journey through this photographic terrain. Like many educators within contemporary photography, I regularly see attempts by graduate students to go into dialogue with art photography's classic preserves. These attempts often fail, due to a lack of rigor in editing, resolution of technique, or the lack of genuine ambition to move beyond making a picture-that-looks-like a William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, or Robert Adams photograph. Lehr's sotto voce rethinking of photography's still-present touchstones makes a resonant addition to the Art Gallery's collection. One of the greatest challenges for contemporary photography is how to show a critical awareness of the practice of photography in tandem with leaving a space for the serendipity and unplanned that will breathe life into a photographic moment. Lehr's photographs consciously manifest this challenge. On one level, *Sound & Fury* offers another rethink of the tropes of contemporary art photography; each photograph containing a side view of advertising and road signage. These totems, with their specific message or instruction obliterated by Lehr's camera angle, touch on the edifying and deliberate nature of the instructions we receive, Pavlov-style, to shift gear and to consume. Although Lehr's choice of subject of the administration and contamination of contemporary life is a well-trammeled area for photography, his choice to essentially repeat the same photographic composition (with the signage pole in the center of each frame) is a brave and revealing strategy. One of the most likely pressure points for photographers' anxieties is the fear that they are, perhaps, perpetually and unconsciously, taking the same picture. If photographers are feeling confident, they might admit which photographs and compositions they will make the whole of their lives. They are the forms or compositions that underpin the history of photography and offer a narrative of the enduring, persistent way that photographers transform the mundane stuff that can sit at the peripheries of our consciousness into signs of great visual charge. Lehr's *Sound & Fury* is an incredibly astute and erudite meditation on the nature of making photographs. He tackles head on the bridging of the desire to visualize and reflect upon contemporary existence with the very nature of seeing photographically.

I couldn't quite work out at first why I found Anthony Lepore's photographs so

Fig. 7. John Lehr, M.F.A. 2005, *New Jersey*, 2005. Pigmented inkjet print, 101.6 x 128.9 cm. The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund. 2006.108.1

Fig. 8. John Lehr, M.F.A. 2005, *Baltimore, Maryland*, 2005. Pigmented inkjet print, 101.6 x 128.43 cm. The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund. 2006.108.3

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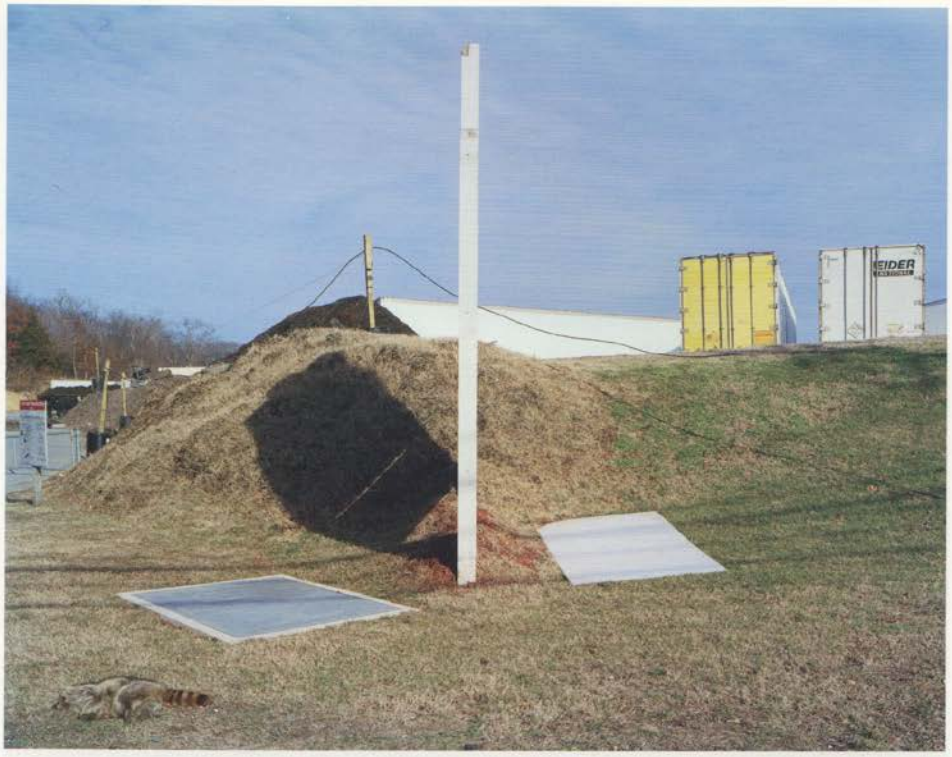

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Fig. 9. Anthony Lepore, M.F.A. 2005, Untitled [San Fernando, CA], 2005. Pigmented inkjet print, 68.6 x 86.4 cm. Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935, Fund. 2006.102.1. Courtesy Marvelli Gallery, New York.

compelling. Despite loving photography for being a medium that can be complete and narrative-rich in a single image (as well as it is in a well-paced sequence) the bell has definitely begun to toll for vogue over the past decade for photographs where every detail of a composed scene is preconceived and then executed by the photographer. We are, I think, underwhelmed by the fading fashionability of making photographs as singular as paintings; the art battle for the idea of photography's potential to be as packed with narrative and symbolism as a historical genre painting is not only won but also over. I initially misread the full and precise nature of Lepore's stand-alone color photographs as the fine and controlled execution of preconceived ideas. I lazily guessed that Lepore had cast his characters, styled their dress, found his locations, and staged his photographs. But the photographs stayed in my memory and it was not until I had the chance to meet Lepore that I realized why this was. First, Lepore adores and studies nature and especially animals. Second, he has the talent of a crowd-wrangler and an atmosphere-creator. He has the confidence and curiosity to go back to the places and the people that shaped his childhood and observe and coerce them like a brilliant wildlife photographer. His photograph Untitled [San Fernando, CA], 2005 (fig. 9), is mesmerizing, in part because of its sexual narrative, but this explains only one aspect of the visual charge of this photograph. It hovers so compellingly between being a staging of passion and a perfect capturing of a genuine sexual tryst. Lepore's photographs are more than pictorial

Fig. 10. Anthony Lepore, M.F.A. 2005, Untitled [Man and woman], from *33rd and Bird*, 2004. Gelatin silver print. 50.7 x 60.5 cm. Gift of the artist in honor of Richard Benson. 2006.102.1. Courtesy Marvelli Gallery, New York.

constructions; they tread a fine line between documents and dioramas and are laden with both serendipity and intent. There is also a pronounced sense of Lepore's wonder at what both people and photography can do. This is the very subject of his *33rd and Bird* series (fig. 10). Lepore set up his camera at the back of the window of a shop selling exquisite birds. Unnoticed by the passers-by who stopped and are shown in reverie at the natural wonder of the birds, Lepore created a series of black-and-white photographs, three of which are now part of the Gallery's collection. His choice of monochrome emphasizes the nostalgic weight of these scenes; of city dwellers un-self-consciously, childishly enjoying this glimmer of nature and momentarily suspending the blank expressions adopted for the contemporary street promenade. It looks so simple, doesn't it? But how to photograph unobserved and repeatedly—without flashlight or grainy film—realize a profound observation so effectively? It's no surprise that Lepore's project was supported, encouraged, and technically led by Richard Benson. I know that this issue of the *Bulletin* is going to be full of tributes to Chip's contribution to Yale and photography at large, but I'd like to add mine. Above the slippery, ever-moving surface, its gliding motion seems effortless and inevitable. But underneath the surface, the true labor is found in muscular, fast-paced, adaptable action. Along with Tod Papageorge, this wise and humane teacher and dean made it possible for so many people to express their wonder and power photographically, and in contemporary ways.

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