



SALON 94

Art in America

REVIEWS Oct 24, 2017

“Picture Industry”

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. at Hessel Museum of Art By Ariel Goldberg

“Picture Industry,” curated by artist Walead Beshty for Bard College’s Hessel Museum of Art, champions multimedia art, periodicals, and moving images that theorize the medium of photography. The walls of the entrance to the exhibition are alight with projections of digitally transferred silent films from the turn of the twentieth century featuring workers leaving factories, including the famed 1895 reel by the Lumière brothers. Viewers have the option to turn right—into galleries of small-scale cultural artifacts, such as a carte de visite of abolitionist Sojourner Truth from 1864—or left, into the loud, theme-park environment of Hito Steyerl’s installation *The Tower* (2015), where seats of cheap red leather face a triptych of curved screens playing a video that explores the use of 3D models to advertise structures like luxury hotels. However you enter the dozen-plus-gallery maze of “Picture Industry,” you’re surrounded by the reflexivity of photography taking a picture of itself. Beshty has selected work that asks how photography might affirm and betray humanity, making the show more thought-provoking than his own trickster installations and pretty photograms.

Lyle Ashton Harris’s “Selections from the Ektachrome Archive” revels in the porous boundary of the artist’s perspective. Harris’s framed color photographs, selected from thousands of 35mm slides shot between 1986 and 2000, are clustered salon-style. They include crucial documents of people who are no longer with us, such as Essex Hemphill (1957-1995), a poet, editor, and activist who wrote fearlessly about love as a black gay man before his early death from HIV/AIDS. In a pink-walled room adorned with mirrors and a vase of flowers, Hemphill is photographed mid-sentence as he either prepares for a reading or decompresses after one. “Ektachrome Archive” combines a social record of conferences, openings, and bedrooms with the everyday aspects of Harris’s own art practice, such as a to-do list on a white legal pad with tasks including “Art Matters application,” “request refund,” “locate lab,” and “drop off letter to Nan Goldin.”

Some of the best moments of “Picture Industry” are those that show in detail the stages by which visual information enters the world. LaToya Ruby Frazier exhibits a vitrine containing materials related to her September 2016 *Elle* magazine photo essay, “Flint Is Family,” portraying the lives of poet Shea Cobb and her family members in Flint, Michigan, which is still suffering from the water crisis that began in 2014. The vitrine is layered with proofs of the essay, medium-format black-and-white contact sheets, a copy of the thick, glossy magazine opened to the story, and Cobb’s handwritten poem “No Filter,” which she reads in a voiceover at the beginning of a related film by Frazier. The film is shown as part of a six-hour screening program that plays on loop in a nearby black-box gallery.

Beshty’s curatorial engagement with ethical and technical quandaries of photography is clarified by the wall texts, which include a range of carefully chosen excerpts of essays, Wikipedia pages, and statements from the artists themselves. One text informs us that Gordon Parks’s *Life* magazine photo-essays, from the 1950s and ’60s, shown in vitrines, are part of Beshty’s personal collection. The works on view shout over one another (quite literally, in the case of video works displayed without headphones), as if the dog-eared pages on Beshty’s own bookshelves—or his browser bookmarks—are clamoring for his attention. The effect demonstrates how any attempt to reinscribe a canon is itself inscribed by the curator’s subjectivity.