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Images offer a powerful, holy trip

Friday, November 17, 2006

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FACTBOX
 • review - "I want to show you somewhere"

The two photography exhibits showing together at Reed College's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery are collectively titled "I want to show you somewhere." But they could not be more different.

The work of Hadley + Maxwell, a Vancouver, B.C., artist team, is political and iconographic; the photographs of New Yorker Lucien Samaha are entirely personal. Samaha draws from thousands of images, treating no single shot preciously. Hadley + Maxwell's exhibit focuses on a single iconic shot. Together, the artists' divergent methods belie a shared sense of image as almost holy in its power.

Ninety-one of Samaha's prints, mostly casual shots of people, are hung informally on the walls with magnets, like snapshots on a refrigerator.

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"It's autobiographical," Samaha said recently while hanging out at the Cooley exhibit. "It's my history." His is a photo album on a grand, highly structured scale.

While Samaha has a keen eye, the exhibit isn't about any one image so much as the ongoing collection of photos the artist has taken, estimated at some 300,000.

But Samaha doesn't just contribute pictures -- he's part of the act, an act that

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recalls the happenings of the late 1960s and '70s. Whenever the gallery is open, he occupies a desk in the center of the room with his laptop, printer, camera and box of files. He seems sort of benevolently territorial -- sometimes a charming tour guide, other times a squinting librarian.

Visitors to Samaha's show -- first performed in Frankfurt, Germany, earlier this year -- can take one photo of their choice, which the artist quickly replaces on the wall with a duplicate print. He then asks permission to take the visitor's picture, as well as for the viewer to take a picture with his original photo included in the frame and e-mail him a copy. Only then can one look up on Samaha's Web site the story behind each photo.

A Lebanese-born longtime New Yorker, Samaha cleverly makes the viewing experience a kind of game, in which participants can walk away with a prize or, with some effort, be lured into the back story behind the photos online. It feels like good advertising, not crassly like a Coors commercial but in a more intriguing, Warholian manner. And like Robert Frank's late career videos, Samaha's dedication, his immersion of himself into his artistic process, is actually the most fascinating aspect of his work, more so even than the prints.

The lone photograph that collaborators and partners Hadley Howes and Maxwell Stephens work from in their next-door installation isn't personal or even self-created, although it's iconic enough to feel as familiar as a family snapshot: a famous newspaper photo taken by John Filo during the Kent State riots of May 4, 1970, in which a woman cries in horror over the dead body of a friend.

Hadley + Maxwell project an altered version of that image onto the gallery wall in which the woman has been removed, leaving the corpse and another person looking off helplessly. Against that shot is projected a video of the artists' figures occupying the silhouettes. They also continually trade places, emphasizing their interchangeability (and ours) as victim or bystander. The video simultaneously projects onto two translucent plastic silhouette figures in the room's foreground, lifelike and three-dimensional like a hologram.

Around the corner from the video installation, Hadley + Maxwell also contribute a series of ethereal but detailed drawings re-imagining the famous photo, this time with aspects of its central figure, the hysterical woman, angelically highlighted. Taken together, the exhibit evokes a wide spectrum of ideas and questions, all born from one iconic image that's both familiar and, in the artists' hands, still drenched with meaning.

Using visual imagery as both tool and touchstone, Lucien Samaha and Hadley + Maxwell's exhibits in "I want to show you somewhere" are ultimately about a quest for truth and authenticity against a spectrum of ever-changing conditions. Seeing the exhibits together makes for a rare gallery offering that's greater than the sum of its parts.

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