

INTRODUCTION

Being a curator requires the sort of humility which allows one to think of oneself as a facilitator — as a responder; at best an explicator. That humility's not always easy to hold on to, and often a curator ends up saying as much about him or herself as about the work at hand.

This exhibition provides a rare opportunity for us to see a photographer's *own* conception of his work and his development. And if a self-curated retrospective seems a bit proud, it also, by its nature, is one step closer to a direct link between the developing creative mind and its audience than a museum retrospective might ordinarily be.

Through this exhibition, Fred Endsley reveals himself to be a person well-versed in the medium's history, its current practice, and in many of its techniques. He is on the staff of a prestigious art school, and he studied with several of the best instructors — he's a college-educated college teacher of photography. He is also, it's important to say, a very perceptive viewer of photographs.

Endsley combines all this knowledge and education in acts of *criticism* as often as in acts of art, and this is the valve of his work. Early on, this activity took the form of a deliberate working-through of the influence of his most important teacher, Robert Fichter, whose bag of technical tricks, iconography, and even whose style for signing prints Endsley borrowed during his student years.

The oldest work in this exhibit dates from shortly after Endsley graduated from Fichter's MFA program at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. (This was Endsley's second master's degree in two years; prior to attending Florida State, he had received an MA from the University of California at Los Angeles. Though his field there was video, he met and studied with Fichter and Robert Heinecken, and through them became increasingly involved in photography.)

Though by 1974 he had started his first teaching job (at The Atlanta College of Art), he was still, he now says, "trying to get Fichter's ideas out of my system." "I wanted to make things that didn't look like art." If Fichter's work represented "visual strength," what Endsley was attempting was something more literal, more personal, even — and this seems furthest from Fichter's concerns at that time — more political. (Perhaps the most personal piece from this period is Endsley's "The Contemporary Photographer as Eunuch," produced shortly after he underwent a vasectomy. His "Different Places/Different Times" series, which compares domestic mundanities in an Americana suburb with those at the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings, is high political — in the philosophical sense, if not the ideological one — in its implications of a correspondence between such disparate peoples and times.)

Shortly before coming to Chicago to begin teaching at the School of the Art Institute, Endsley began a series of photographs which made use of a toy figure of Yogi Berra. The series was not entirely what he wanted artistically, but it was important for another reason. "It got me back into silver," he says. "The gum prints I was making in Atlanta were more like films than still photographs — you build the picture over days or weeks or months from fragments that you've collected. I realized that that wasn't what photography was to me — that I wanted the process to be more spontaneous — easier, in a way."

Though he occasionally continues with his filmic techniques, much of this more recent "non-silver" work gives evidence of his stated desire to work less deliberately, more intuitively. Thus his move to the easier and

faster magazine transfers of late 1975 and early 1976. One quite simple blueprint ("About the Nature of the Brushstroke in Photography") asks, in a very direct way, a question that Fichter and his group of students struggled with repeatedly: "where/what is the boundary between photography and painting?"

For the most part, though, Endsley now confines himself to more or less traditional techniques. One of his most ingenious projects is the *cliche-verre* series produced over the last two years. As a response to what he calls the "bullet-proof surface" of an earlier group of solarizations, he began to scratch 35mm negatives in various ways and to print the new pictures which resulted. When he learned that Thomas Barrow was at work on a similar piece of photographic criticism (his now well-known "Cancellations" series), Endsley responded with "39 Cancellations for Tom Barrow," a picture specifically dedicated to Barrow. But Endsley's motive in scratching his negatives is to add a new layer of meaning in a manner quite different from Barrow's subtle formal exercises. Endsley's scratches are drawings which become a part of the picture — often in a literal or anecdotal way.

The on-going body of "straight" 35mm photographs which makes up a large part of this exhibition is the most direct in its reference to the medium, its history, and its workers. But while these pictures may tell us something about the work of Lee Friedlander, Michael Bishop, Nathan Lyons, Roger Martin, Bart Parker, or any of a number of artists, they also are, in the last analysis, keys only to themselves. For just as the *cliche-verre* pictures rely more upon content than on form (and thus become entirely different from Barrow's perhaps similar-looking prints), so this series is an attempt to suggest an alive and animate (often a human) presence. (Best example: One picture recalls Paul Outerbridge's famous saltine canister — yet while the central subject of the Outerbridge appears to be some sharp-edged metal brick, Endsley has photographed the more organic form of a cylindrical flower pot. Reflected in the metallic background is an amorphous shape — a "plant" growing from the pot.)

The diversity of ideas and variety of techniques Endsley employs seem at once the most exciting feature of this show and its major flaw. Yet Endsley is aware of the wide range of concerns his pictures express. He not only accepts it — he seeks it out. He speaks of a "life cycle of these different bodies of work," and of "killing off" an idea or series "when it becomes facile."

It is true that, were he to develop a more well-defined stylistic signature, we might think his work more accessible and his oeuvre more coherent. But the danger, of course, is that it might also become easy for us to categorize him — to determine his rank in the hierarchy of art, and to then expect him to produce what we've known him to do in the past.

That, for Endsley, is a greater danger than that of being misunderstood. It's why he is curating his own retrospective, and why he is exhibiting work which grew out of a variety of ideas and circumstances. "My work is held together by its difference," he says. "I don't want to polish the same stone all my life."

— Charles Desmarais
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for Contemporary Photography