



© Vanessa Winship

Vanessa Winship, "Victor Snr and Victor Jr after the Church Meeting, Richmond, Virginia" (25 March 2012).

Social landscape in view

2 generations of keen observers presented in Pier 24 exhibition

By Charles Desmarais

"The Grain of the Present" at the nonprofit foundation Pier 24 Photography gives us new insights into the continued vitality of a certain way of working in the medium, and some of the most important photographers of the past 50 years are represented by astute selections of their work. On view through Jan. 31, the exhibition comprises what might almost be 17 substantial shows, each displayed in a separate room.

The various sub-exhibitions present classic works by nine first-generation observers of the

"Grain" continues on E2



© Alec Soth

Alec Soth, "Tricia and Curtis" (2005).

Ways of viewing the social landscape

"Grain" from page E1

so-called "social landscape" (Robert Adams, Diane Arbus, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Lee Friedlander, Stephen Shore, Henry Wessel, Garry Winogrand) and eye-opening new takes by a second generation (Eamonn Doyle, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Ed Panar, Alec Soth, Awoiska van der Molen, Vanessa Winship).

In other words, there are at least 17 reasons to see "Grain of the Present," and few excuses not to. Entrance to the vast space, where the installations are always impeccable and the content museum-grade, is free (weekdays only, reservation required).

Despite a few pioneering thinkers, it was not until the 1970s that the art world began to take photography seriously. Even then, there was an invisible but palpable border between what we thought of as "art photography" (a term widely used at the time) and the medium's more vulgar uses. The vulgar, according to the bias of the day, included editorial images (journalism), commercial ones (advertising) and a gray area between (fashion, travel, etc.).

All that began to change as the field absorbed the impact of books and exhibitions that challenged the old divisions. A quest for a new "visual literacy" brought acceptance of 1960s efforts like Robert Frank's "The Americans," which looked something like reportage but felt like a memoir, or Ed Ruscha's quirky artist's books that borrowed from tool catalogs and real estate ads.

The work of two particularly astute photography curators, Nathan Lyons (George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y.) and John Szarkowski (Museum of Modern Art), brought forward '60s and '70s artists whose attitude of clinical disinterest, akin to that of the social scientist, suffused their pictures. Or so we were told.

The first two rooms of "Grain of the Present" introduce the primary themes of the artists included. "Family Album" and "Our Town," though resembling journalism, present intimate, unassuming portraits and views that try — disingenuously, as it turns out — to convince us that this is no one, no place noteworthy. Titles tend to the deadpan ("Lewis, Santa Monica" for the picture Henry Wessel made of his friend, the noted photographer Lewis Baltz, in 1993) and the purposely obfuscatory (to learn that Ed Panar's doleful townscapes record his Pennsylvania hometown requires detective work and an Internet mapping application).

The affectation is that we are in universal territory. Several of the artists in the show were included in a famous 1975 exhibition, "New Topographics," that compared them to dispassionate map-makers. This exhibition peels back that veneer of bloodless objectivity, however, to reveal something much more poetic, more raw.

The passage of time has endowed much of that early work with new layers of meaning. The lighthearted sexism of Winogrand's "Women Are Beautiful" series makes its subjects more sympathetic, less foolish today than they were 40 or 50 years ago, and the 1984 death of the artist at 56 adds a note of melancholy. Even the monolithic industrial facilities pictured by Bernd

and Hilla Becher seem sadder, doomed, with the shift of major world economies away from labor and resources as we once understood them.

Arbus taught us to see, so that we no longer gasp at exposure to her unflinching vision: These were always people, never freaks, and now we see them in all their sympathetic humanity. Friedlander's extensive series "The Little Screens" (1961-70) — pictures of flickering TVs in unpeopled rooms — no longer answers to Walker Evans' description of them as "little poems of hate," but evoke loss and memory in a dusty half-light.

It is, however, the work of the so-called second generation of artists included in this exhibition that most pointedly

reveals the sentimental heart of the first. All born between 1960 and 1983, they could not have learned to make the pictures they do without awareness of their predecessors. Yet all of them (with the exception of Awoiska van der Molen, whose attractive landscapes of 2009 to 2015 are a stretch to include in the context of this exhibition) developed deeply personal interpretations of the supposedly barefaced testimonial approach of the social landscape photographer.

Alec Soth, at 48 the second-oldest of the six and probably the best known, has developed a straightforward vocabulary that gives voice to the unnoticed and the unappreciated. In something of the same vein, Ed Panar tells a story of quotidian life in a crumbling Rust

Belt city by recording a kind of visual silence, left behind as the world moves on.

LaToya Ruby Frazier doesn't see things that way. She looks at her hometown, just an hour or so away from Panar's, as a place where her family still survives and struggles. Panar stands, psychologically, way back: Any people in the world he designs are known only by their absence. Frazier could hardly get closer: she shows us "Gramps's Feet," "Grandma Ruby's Hands," "Grandma Ruby on Her Recliner" (all 2002). Then she wraps herself in her grandparents' pajamas and bedclothes for a series of images made in 2010.

Elderly people, in the photographs by Eamonn Doyle included here, are pictured on the street from above, calling

attention to their bent bodies and thinning hair. Compact forms isolated against the sidewalk, they are alien to their city environment.

At the beginning of the current decade, the British artist Vanessa Winship took an outsider's road trip reminiscent of Swiss immigrant Robert Frank's journey more than 50 years earlier. Her America is a less harsh place, but also a sadder one.

These more recent works, in a completely unanticipated way, unfurl the coiled yearning at the core of the social landscape's feigned remoteness.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1



© Ed Panar

Ed Panar, "September 2005, 669 Bedford Street" (2005).



© Eamonn Doyle / Michael Hoppen Gallery, London

Eamonn Doyle, "Untitled 07 from the series i" (2013).

Several of the artists in the show were included in a famous 1975 exhibition. The passage of time has endowed much of the early work with new layers of meaning.



© LaToya Ruby Frazier / Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome

LaToya Ruby Frazier, "Momme" (2008).

"The Grain of the Present": 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday. Through Jan. 31. Free (appointment required). Pier 24 Photography, on the Embarcadero, S.F. (415) 512-7424. www.pier24.org