



Sicardi Gallery

# Photography in focus at Bay Area shows

Video also strong at Cantor's substantial Latin America exhibition

By Charles Desmarais

It is unlikely that any city offers more opportunities per citizen to see top examples of the art of photography than San Francisco. This month is a particularly good time to visit several excellent exhibitions. Opening next week are eagerly anticipated presentations at Altman Siegel ("Trevor Paglen: Impossible Objects"), Casemore Kirkeby ("Steve Kahn: Stasis, Corridors, 1969-1980") and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ("The Train").

## South of the U.S. border:

The Cantor Arts Center's extraordinary "The Matter of Photography in the Americas" is already on view and runs through April 30. Led by scholar/curators from both UC Berkeley (Natalia Brizuela) and Stanford University (Jodi Roberts), who devoted three years to the research, it is the kind of show few institutions outside of academia can afford these days to produce.

To fully appreciate the exhibition is also, it must be said, an academic exercise. It's a big,

wordy project, accompanied by an essential 232-page book.

Most of the work, unfamiliar even to those well-versed in the medium of photography, requires not only attention to the wall labels, but also close reading of the pictures themselves.

There are visual rewards. Adriana Bustos offers surreal situations in color photography and video that walk the line between real and made up, in environments like painted backdrops and museum dioramas. Miguel Calderón also

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LMAK Gallery, New York

Top: Oscar Muñoz's video "Línea del destino" is included in an exhibition of photographic works by Latin American artists. Above: Claudia Joskowicz's video "Every Building on Avenida Alfonso Ugarte — After Ruscha."

# Photography in focus in Bay Area

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photographs dioramas — it is a familiar trope of the medium (see Hiroshi Sugimoto, below) — but Bustos jumps in, literally, in her video works.

In fact, video is strong throughout the exhibition. Two works by Oscar Muñoz, mounted side-by-side, are short meditations on the frailty of images, memory and, by extension, life itself. Claudia Joskowicz made “Every Building on Avenida Alfonso Ugarte — After Ruscha” with Ed Ruscha’s “Every Building on the Sunset Strip” in mind, but her version pulses with color and movement, with political overtones the senior artist would shun.

Still, many of the pictures are static, small and in black-and-white. A significant number were produced with Xerox-style photocopiers, and lots of them, by design, are visually degraded copies of copies.

The idea of a monolithic “Latin America” — encompassing most of this hemisphere; two primary languages and many variants; and different topographies, economies and histories — is itself called into question. The approach of many artists in the exhibition borders on the scientific, prompting the curators to group them into categories like “Ethnography,” “Copies” and “Data.”

Yet, despite such curatorial roadblocks, a convincing thesis emerges. It is not an attempt to shoehorn into one theoretical framework all pictures made in a certain part of the world. It is, simply, the observation that much Latin American photo-based work of the past 50 years has reflected upon itself, examining the medium as a tool and a process, even as it took on the simultaneous obligation of political and social analysis.

At the same time, and not so simply, it is a revelation that the conceptual underpinnings of photography as understood by artists in Latin America are more sophisticated, more substantial than we knew. Or, perhaps more likely, than we were willing to give them credit for.

**Prehistoric photographs:** In “Hiroshi Sugimoto B.C.,” which opened this week and runs through April 25, Fraenkel Gallery presents no new pictures. The show spans 33 years; the most recent piece is dated 2009. While fans of the



Miguel Calderón, “Museum of Natural History, Series #3” (1995).

Kurimanzutto, Mexico City



Linda Connor, “Tomb Doorway, Petra, Jordan” (1995).

Haines Gallery

artist will know most of the images, however, the staging is a refreshing twist on the exhibition form itself.

Several brief texts authored by the artist describe his preoccupation with the past and with the very idea of time. That would seem a likely in-

terest of any photographer, given the testamentary function of the medium, its archival utility, its ability to examine action by the microsecond. Here, Sugimoto turns from fascination to meditation.

The show starts with a misty, romantic landscape

made in 1977, early in his career.

“When I stood at the foot of the Kegon Waterfall,” he writes, “I felt as though I was witnessing a primeval moment of the falls’ creation.”

A 1994 image of a natural history diorama, “Earliest

Human Relatives,” depicts a prehistoric hominid couple strolling across an ancient savanna. Sugimoto is known for his flawless technique, and it is a marvel to compare that 1994 work to “Galapagos” (1980), in a fruitless attempt to determine whether the earlier work was also shot in a museum, or at a solitary moment on a beach in the Pacific archipelago.

Sugimoto’s collection of photography’s own prehistory (he purchased original negatives by the inventor of photography, from which he made new prints) and of arresting, fossil-studded rocks, tens and hundreds of millions of years old, add to the melancholic air.

**Listening for answers:** Also recently opened and, likewise, a reconsideration of earlier work, is a show of curious pictures by one of San Francisco’s most respected and beloved photographers, Linda Connor. The exhibition is “Speak to the Stones, and the Stars Answer,” on view at Haines Gallery through June 2. It pairs Connor’s oddly metallic new prints from old negatives with stainless steel “Artificial Rocks,” by the Chinese artist Zhan Wang.

One of the compelling things about Connor’s best-known earlier work is the sense that each picture was made as an object for deep contemplation. One reason for that is their intimate size, at 8x10 inches. Also important is their seemingly infinite detail, which she achieved by contact printing a full-scale negative on fine paper. Above all, the works convey a sense of craftsmanship that demonstrate respect — even reverence — for subjects that have something of the sacred about them.

Zhan Wang’s hand-wrought, highly polished steel rocks are a wry update of the ancient tradition of the scholar stone, inverting our expectations of surface texture and contour. They are, despite their title and their function as replicas, anything but artificial. Connor’s new prints, on the other hand, made by the industrial dye-sublimation process on aluminum, are but tinselled imitations of her own extraordinary originals.

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