

ALTERED IMAGES:

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOYCE NEIMANAS, SUSAN RANKAITIS, AND KATHY FRIDSTEIN

February 14 – March 31, 1985
Seattle Art Museum
Pavilion at Seattle Center

The works in this exhibition contain photographic images, and, in most cases, are built on some kind of photographic print. Yet photography is only one of many tools used in the conception and execution of these images. They convey ideas, impressions, intuitions, even metaphors, but unlike images of conventional photography, what we see here does not record unaltered facets or moments of some objective reality. In other words, the images are not directly "about" landscape, events, people or objects: they were not made for purposes of journalism, record-keeping, or remembrance. In consequence we cannot rely upon our stock of conventional responses to photography when trying to understand what is going on in these pictures.

Because the photographic images presented here are obscured or distorted to some degree, we are forced to think about the manner in which we do in fact respond to unaltered and unmanipulated ("straight") photographs. In addition, because there is also imagery in these works that is clearly not produced by a camera alone, in examining them we must call upon our ability to interpret and understand paintings and drawings at the same time that we are also trying to figure out how much of our photographic attention to focus.

We could simply look at these works as pictures full of images, shapes, and colors that express feelings or layers of ideas intended by the artists. Most of us will probably take this option. But without the mind to engage it, the eye wanders. Some brief philosophical and historical background might enrich the ways in which we can perceive and enjoy these sometimes difficult pictures.

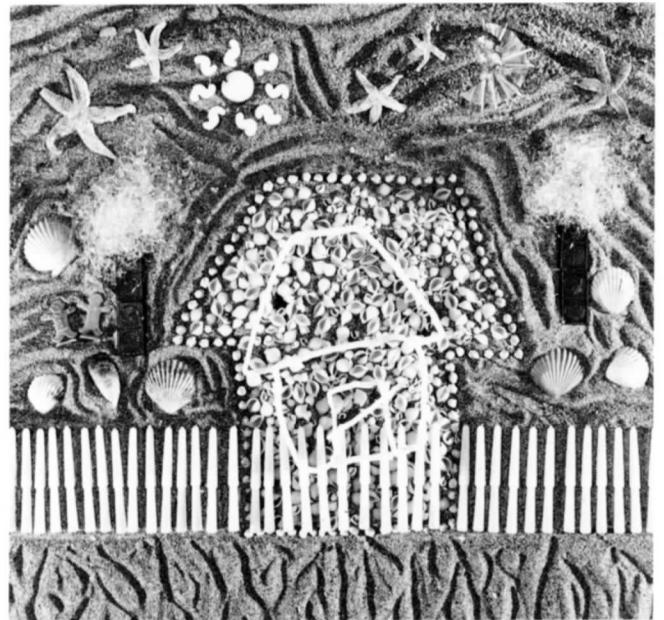


Joyce Neimanas, *Untitled*

We do not normally confuse paintings, whether abstract or representational, with the reality that the painter observed when making them. They are other things, third parties acting as metaphorical or explanatory buffers between the viewer and an objective reality. Part of this response to painting arises from the way they look, part of it from what we know: somebody made them with their hands. Unmanipulated, straight photographs are intermediaries no less than paintings, and no less made by somebody's hands. But it is very easy to confuse them with the reality they merely represent, especially when companies that sell film constantly urge us to believe that the snapshots we take are not merely *like* memories, but in fact *are* memories. In addition, the validation of reality by means of certain kinds of photographic images provides an overwhelming incentive to continue perpetrating this subtle and complex misconception. For example, we are sometimes required in courts of law to examine evidence available only in photographs. We are constantly urged to make critical personal decisions based on the notion of photographic truth: to buy this car, or that political candidate, this beauty aid to make us resemble ideal sex objects, or the rightness of that war in a country about which we know nothing. Given the widespread confidence in the absolute veracity of the photographic image that such decision-making requires, it becomes difficult to step back and consider photographs for what they are: flat, two-dimensional objects that express *intentions* as well as depict *objects*, and contain carefully selected references to reality that have a rhetorical weight calculated not only to express specific ideas, but also to intentionally exclude others.

How we see photographs and what they convey is even a bit more complicated than that. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake wrote in a review of several of the first critical essays on photography in the *Quarterly Review* (London, 1857), only twenty years after the various inventions of photography, "What are her [photography's] representations. . . but the facts which are neither the province of art nor of description, but of that new form of communication between man and man—neither letter, message, nor picture—which now happily fills up the space between them." The implication of this semantic complexity is that photography is so good at communicating our everyday world to us that it functions more as a language than it does as a tool for description, on the one hand, or abstraction on the other. If this seems to make it an unlikely artistic medium, we must consider that the art of poetry arises from the commonplace medium of our everyday language.

Ansel Adams, a master of the straight photograph, insisted on perceiving photography in the way that he perceived music (he was a pianist of considerable accomplishment). Adams was fond of pointing out that we rarely discuss what a piece of music represents in the same way that we discuss what is "in" a



Kathy Fridstein, *Well-Guarded House*



Susan Rankaitis, *Runway*

photograph. This idea is helpful if we want to think clearly about photography not just as a new medium but as a new mode of communication, as Lady Eastlake suggests. But to do so, we need to return to that moment in the late 1830s, when the first photograph was seen, and imagine what it would have been like to see it in terms of the conventions of picture-making developed up until that time in painting, drawing, and printmaking. After 150 years we have seen too many photographs: we are no longer aware of the conventions of expression either adopted or developed by photographers that allow photographs to communicate meaning to us. This makes it even more difficult for us to see them as Adams saw them: as complicated poems whose meaning derives only in part from the objects or events in the picture.

The pictures by Neimanas, Rankaitis, and Fridstein in this exhibition combine handwork with photographic imagery, preventing us from looking at them as at a straight photograph—as if we were gazing out a window. Because we are faced with more than one form of graphic expression, we are coerced into keeping important questions in mind: what are these pictures up to? Are they persuading us in the same way as advertising imagery? Are they communicating verbal ideas, or creating states of mind that help us sort out our own ideas? These pictures are not simple to understand: it is never easy to deal with two languages at the same time, in this case the language of photography and that of drawing. It takes some courage on the part of these artists to combine different aesthetic languages—their proliferation can sometimes paralyze meaning.

This last idea, insofar as it concerns conventions of picture-making, needs a historical note for the sake of placing in context the work in this exhibition. The student of the history of photography notices that early on there was a peculiar, recurring argument among photographers themselves concerning the alteration of the photographic image and mixing it with other media. In the 1880s Peter Henry Emerson fought with his fellow Englishman Henry Peach Robinson over the validity of manipulating photographic images. Robinson was an artist who combined images from negatives taken at different times and in different places in order to achieve certain preconceived effects. Emerson was a fanatic for rules and insisted on establishing one dictating that photography be “optically and chemically pure.” Everything else was, for him, a “fuzzograph.” In America between 1900 and 1916, Edward Steichen, Alfred Steiglitz, and their followers felt at the time that highly manipulated photographic images more readily gained acceptance by the general public as “art” because they looked more like paintings or etchings. In the 1920s Willard Van Dyke, Edward Weston, and others returned to Emerson’s ideas and insisted that if photography were to be respected among the other arts, it would have to be true to its own unique qualities. And so it goes, to the present. But this cyclical argument is really about rules, not about making pictures, and it usually has a negative effect on the artistic environment that fosters it.

The net effect for the three artists in this exhibition is positive, however. None of the work shown here needs cumbersome scaffolds of critical verbiage to sustain or clarify it beyond the meaning that is evident in it. This is refreshing at a point in the history of photography when pictures have become less important (and less numerous) than their explanations. The following brief introductions to the artists are intended as starting places for the viewer: the works themselves are far more informative.

Joyce Neimanas has been teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1977. She is a prolific artist; a retrospective exhibition of her work was held recently at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, Tucson. (Much of the work in the present exhibition was drawn from that retrospective; a catalogue of it is available in the museum store.) In her own words: “Art is an attitude that produces an object by using media. Media does not produce Art.” Her pictures are concerned with problems of distortion of artistic intention by aesthetic conventions and rules. A parallel problem is the manipulation and distortion of individuals by the societal conventions governing personal relationships, sexual roles, and physical beauty: the subject matter of many of the pictures. Neimanas was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Photographer Fellowship in 1979 and 1982 and has published and exhibited her work widely.

Susan Rankaitis currently teaches art at Chapman College, Orange, California, and was also a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship recipient in 1980. She has extended the limits of photographic technique by hand-applying chemicals to photographic



Joyce Neimanas, *Untitled*

paper. In a recent letter she stated: "I've never had the slightest desire to make what can best be described as straight prints so it wasn't like I photographed a certain way and then altered that way of photographing. Rather, I was a painter and was drawn to the alchemy of the photographic process. Now I just think of myself as a plain old visual artist in that I don't feel at all medium bound." Rankaitis thinks that the layers of color and form in her works, reminiscent of abstract expressionist painting, are of equal importance to the recognizable photographic images they contain.

Kathy Fridstein recently received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied photography, video, and painting. During 1983/1984 she taught photography at Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington, while continuing her own work at Triangle Studios in Seattle. Her work reflects an interest she holds in the power of public communications: graffiti, symbols used by transients to pass on information about the safety or danger of particular places, and ancient petroglyphs. The immediacy and succinctness of these forms of communication, she feels, are akin to photographic communication. In addition, all three forms are usually found layered, new over old. In a like manner, Fridstein has used photographic images of shapes and objects in sand and painted over them, obliterating and combining meaning at the same time.

For additional information on some of the arguments reviewed in these notes see: *Photography: Essays and Images*, edited by Beaumont Newhall, published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Some of the work in this exhibition was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Rod Slemmons
Associate Curator of Photography



Susan Rankaitis, *Dockweiler Beach, LAX I*



Kathy Fridstein, *Rat Race*