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When a Form Is Given Its Room to Play 'A World of Its Own,' Examining Photography, at MoMA

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By Roberta Smith

Something old, something new, nothing borrowed and not enough color. A variation on the venerable bridal dress code pretty much sums up the Museum of Modern Art's latest foray into its photography collection, "A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio." In turn, the title of this fabulous yet irritating survey offers its own variation — on the name of Virginia Woolf's famous essay about female independence, "A Room of One's Own" — but the show itself, which opens on Saturday, dazzles but often seems slow and repetitive.

It's not for lack of a good idea. Organized by Quentin Bajac, the photography department's new chief curator, and Lucy Gallun, its assistant curator, this exhibition nervily ignores the great stream of images with which the Modern's influential photography department has been most identified: those taken in the outside world that document landscapes, cities, wars, significant events, everyday existence — including the vibrant tradition of street photography.

On the contrary, the curators set out to trace the medium from inception to the present in a way that has never quite been done at this institution, by concentrating exclusively on images taken in the studio rather than everywhere else.

And so we get professional portraitists, commercial photographers, lovers of still life, darkroom experimenters, artists documenting performances and a few generations of postmodernists, dead and alive, known and not so, exploring the ways and means of the medium. This adds up to plenty to see: around 180 images from the 1850s to the present by some 90 photographers and artists. The usual suspects here range from Julia Margaret Cameron to Thomas Ruff, with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Lucas Samaras, John Divola and Barbara Kasten in between.

The less familiar names include the British photographer Charles Harry Jones (1866-1959), whose still lifes of fruit and vegetables were rediscovered in 1981 and whose 1900 "Brussels Sprouts" has the aplomb of a small monument; the French artist Maurice Tabard (1897-1984), whose 1929 image of a woman partly lost in a confusion of reflections, shadows and a double exposure, hauntingly encapsulates between-the-wars glamour and anxiety; and Geta Bratescu, a Romanian artist born in 1926 who developed her own avant-garde tendencies in her Bucharest studio during the Ceausescu regime.

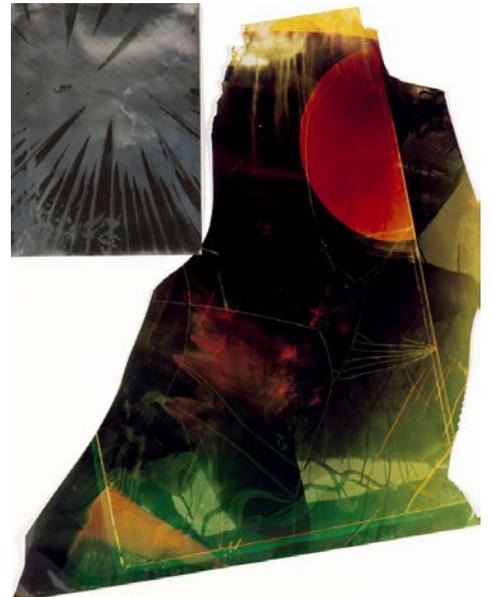
Among the postmodern cohort, Valérie Belin is represented by a large grisaille portrait of a beautiful mannequin that, while fake, looks alive; Shirana Shahbazi isolates a taxidermic bird in flight on a solid red ground for even greater ambiguity; and Mariah Robertson, who seems to go wilding in the darkroom, making splattered, cracked, richly colored image fragments descended from Rauschenberg. In typical MoMA style, it looks impeccable.

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Yet despite breaking with MoMA tradition, "A World of Its Own" is often overly demure and fine-grained as well as a little out of it, and not just because it is dominated by black-and-white images in an age when color reigns. This exhibition uses a great collection to tell what should have been a fascinating story, but it dwells too much in the past, has a tad too many familiar names and images and also leaves the present blurry. It's great if you like to drift among handsome photographs making close comparisons and linkages — and who doesn't, some of the time? — less so if you are also interested in historical precedent and influence.

The exhibition occupies all six of the museum's photography galleries, each of which has been assigned a different subtheme. The studio is seen variously as subject, stage, set, laboratory, blank backdrop and playground and, always, as a kind of haven in which the artist has total control. But the show then circles through these galleries with a constant formula that mixes then and now, old chestnuts and little-seen works or recent acquisitions. This creates the impression of repeatedly starting over, taking two steps forward and one back.

In the first gallery, "Surveying the Studio," a composite photograph from 1967 shows Bruce Nauman's studio floor strewn with scraps from making sculptures. It faces elegant studio views from the 1920s, '30s and '50s by Man Ray, Charles Sheeler, Constantin Brancusi and the ineffably poetic Josef Sudek. Projected on the adjacent wall is "The Studio," a touching film from 1978 by Ms. Bratescu, in which she alternately dreams, works and plays while the camera explores the space. It is exhibited with a storyboard that includes the artist. This film is across from Uta Barth's large irradiated triptych, "Sundial (07.13)" of 2007, which records the silken effects of the sun washing through a window shade at different times of day and bleaching the image.



Mariah Robertson's "30" (2009)

In the show's final gallery, "The Studio, From Laboratory to Playground," we have Mr. Nauman again. This time he's grouped with other Post-Minimalists like William Wegman, Adrian Piper and Barry Le Va, along with motion studies from the 1930s by Harold Edgerton and from the 1880s by Eadweard Muybridge. Also present is "Boston," six large Polaroids from 1985 by Robert Frank, a great street photographer who came in from the cold with less distinguished results.

All the jumping around in time tends to make the show feel ahistorical. The few labels make little mention of art movements or current events. In terms of the recent past, it remains true to the Modern's continuing infatuation with Post-Minimalism — the last, and largest, gallery is dominated by it.

Surprisingly the show skimps on postmodern photography of the 1980s, much of it made by women, that did a lot to reorient contemporary photo artists to the studio. It is a little startling for an exhibition that includes so many younger artists dealing with the artifice of the photograph (Ms. Belin, for example) to represent the Pictures Generation artists with only Cindy Sherman, James Casebere and (in collaboration with Allan McCollum) Laurie Simmons. There's nothing by James Welling or Louise Lawler, nor any of Ms. Simmons's small, intensely colored doll photographs from 1979, even though the museum owns work by all of them. Another omission is the early work of Sarah Charlesworth, whose images of figures, luxury objects and artworks isolated on saturated color grounds are clearly precedent for the works here by Ms. Shahbazi as well as Matthew Barney and Elad Lassry. (His 2009 ode to consumerism and color — five red lipsticks on bright green pedestals — looks great next to Paul Outerbridge Jr.'s 1936 "Images of Deauville," a staged image that conjures a suave, Surrealist travel poster.)

The Modern doesn't own a relevant Charlesworth, but it should. In addition, someone at the museum should look into the early work of Sara VanDerBeek, whose photographs of delicate constructions involving photographs and small objects find their precedent here in the exquisite advertising images of the Japanese photographic team of Shozo Kitadai (1921-2001) and Kiyoji Otsuji (1923-2001).

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The curators often seem content to unearth a few modernist gems, create some illuminating juxtapositions and make local historical adjustments. The section “The Studio as Stage,” which concentrates on portraiture from the 19th-century pioneer Nadar to Ms. Sherman, includes a tenebrous image of a Peruvian peasant that the Peruvian photographer Martin Chambi (1891-1973) took in his Cuzco studio around 1933. Nearby hangs Irving Penn’s much better known image of a Peruvian peasant and her daughter in the same studio, with better lighting, from 1948. Neither invented the convention of photographing indigenous peoples, but it is always interesting to be reminded of Penn’s debt to Chambi, the renowned portraitist and documentary maker. (The Modern acquired the Penn in 1959, the Chambi in 1983.)

In that final, Post-Minimal gallery, the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s ecstatic chain-reaction masterpiece, “The Way Things Go” of 1987, is projected near two monitors showing 18 very short films by Roman Signer, a slightly senior Swiss artist, mostly from between 1975 and 1985, many of which present isolated, unchained reactions, often involving sand. The suggestion is that Weiss and Mr. Fischli saw Mr. Signer’s short films and decided to run them together.

It’s too bad this sense of fairness is felt a little more often here. But this is still an impressive debut for Mr. Bajac. He and Ms. Gallun clearly aimed for a satisfying viewing experience, which, these days, is something to be grateful for.

“A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio” is on view from Saturday through Oct. 5 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, moma.org.