

M + B

ARTFORUM

Phil Chang

LAXART

Straightforward depiction simply doesn't cut it for a photographer like Phil Chang. Not today, not this deep into the digital-imaging revolution unleashed by Google, Instagram, iPhones, and all the other democratizing platforms, apps, and mobile devices that have made photographic representation not only ubiquitous but ever more virtual. The medium, decidedly in protracted flux, has been thrown into crisis and forced to grapple with the new reality of chronic image-exhaustion. How can photography resist the numbness of which it is the very cause? Structurally, Chang might suggest—perhaps even suicidally. For this LA-based artist, a contemporary photographic aesthetic must be as much about what's not pictured and not visible as about what is, and the work's critical agency must be constructed through an exploration of process and materiality.

In this show, Chang presented a test case—an installment of new works from the series "Cache, Active," 2010–, a wall of images printed on expired photographic paper that was left unfixed so that each print would (and did) rapidly degrade in the exhibition space as soon as it was brought into the light necessary to see it. Representation was caught in a double bind, its latent instability and urgency hyperbolized even as it vanished before the viewer's eyes in an act of self-sabotage. Presenting photography as a durational performance, the artist literally unveiled the works at the opening, exposing them to the gallery's bright fluorescence, which gradually darkened the pictures until, after several hours, all appeared a uniform dull maroon tone. In effect, photography's presumed fixity was recast as transience, invisibility, and opacification.

Installed as a horizontal grid of twenty-one pieces—all identically framed in black with a white matte and vertically oriented like portraits, or like Allan McCollum's "surrogates"—the series appeared monochromatic for the rest of the exhibition's run. Yet prior to the photographs' chemical disappearance, the installation simulated an ersatz vintage-photo wall, the pictures encompassing, in their warm sepia shades, a range of the medium's principal genres, from portraiture and landscape to still life and photogram abstractions. Each image was titled with a dry description of the thing it very soon no longer depicted—for example, *Man, Sitting*, 2011, or *Single Piece of Cardboard Balancing on Edge*, 2010, or *Sea #2*, 2011—which cast a strange, mournful air back onto the prints' ghostly blankness.

Crucially, there was a narrow window of opportunity for seeing these pictures. And the finality stung. Catalyzing and theatricalizing absence, Chang triggered affective pangs of loss, insisting on the multivalent mortality of his images, while at the same time allegorizing the obsolescence of photography's (pre-digital) technology. As

they faded, the pictures lingered in the memories of those who had seen them, at once raising the stakes of viewership through the moral imperative of bearing witness and privileging oral description as the primary way in which the work's vanished history will survive and circulate thereafter.

Though it may seem a throwback to late-1960s Conceptualism or faintly give off the air of a clever trick—like Robert Barry photographing an invisible liter of inert gas released into the atmosphere—Chang's disappearing act in "Cache, Active" is timely and forceful. Perhaps it is the project's emphasis on *becoming* monochrome, experienced here as a doomed process in which pictorial heterogeneity settles into drab homogeneity, that pushes Chang's gesture toward critique of the contemporary image regime and lends the procedural "trick" real depth. There is a crushing inexorability conveyed in the turning over from distinct to interchangeable units (the very definition of the commodity); it is the force of entropy, the collapse of all difference into sameness, equilibrium—and it feels like death. But despite this grim sentence, the series' resulting equivalence radiates something liberatory. Denying representation's permanence, letting go of documentation in exchange for opacity and blockage, the flushed monochromes suggest a relinquishing of selfhood and ego in pursuit of transcendence—glimpsed here as the specter of abstraction.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer



View of "Phil Chang," 2012.

SUMMER 2012 325