

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

April 8, 2007

surprise

Filed under: [exhibitions \(not mine\)](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:45 pm



Mick Jagger and Brian Jones going home satisfied after composing 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction') from Suddenly this Overview 1981-2006 by Fischli & Weiss

Today I saw the great Fischli & Weiss retrospective at Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Mixing casualness with genuine surprise, each of the thirteen rooms managed to evoke a feeling of childlike wonder. It was one of those rare exhibitions where you leave the museum feeling changed (not a bad experience to have on Easter). For a brief moment everything felt balanced – almost perfect. The street rubbish looked like flowers – and the blossoming flowers were awfully pretty too.

The show pulled together a number of things that have been on my mind lately. [Recently writing](#) about the eclectic photographs of Judy Linn, I asked how she managed to make such unrelated and unclassifiable images cohere. In response to this post, [Tim Conner](#) wrote something very interesting:

I've noticed that the only shows that don't fit into a catchy concept (the faces of Iraq war veterans, hypnotized subjects, naked mothers & children in the wild, etc.) are by photographers who are at the end of their careers or dead, with names that are already an established brand. Only then, it seems, can imagery be allowed to stray off message or venture into more than one style.

This also related to something [Christian Patterson wrote](#) on his blog:

I admire photographers who incorporate a variety of subject matter and approach in their work, and I admire the projects, books and exhibitions that showcase this variety while somehow conveying a consistent, cohesive overall style and feeling.

I am most often disappointed and disinterested when I see a project, open a book, or visit an exhibition that features a group of photographs of the same subject matter, shot from the same vantage point, and lit in the same way. It is essentially the same idea and the same shot executed over and over.

The pleasure I took from the Fischli & Weiss retrospective confirmed my agreement with Christian. And I suspect that Tim's argument is accurate too. If Fischli & Weiss were working in a strictly photographic context (rather than as interdisciplinary artists), I doubt they would get very far with their scattershot approach.

Surprise is so good. So pleasurable. In the current issue of *Modern Painters*, the poet Quinn Latimer wrote something fantastic about this pleasure. While introducing the work of Martin Soto Climent (who makes work reminiscent of Fischli & Weiss), Latimer wrote:

In a 1984 essay called "Images," the Poet Robert Hass recalls a line from Chekhov's notebooks as he contemplates the discreet power and intense pleasure of an image that arises sans explanation or narrative explication. In one of a series of isolated entries, the doctor wrote, "They are mineral bottles with preserved cherries in them." Hass notes how the lack of context intensifies the sentence. At the same time, and paradoxically, the exactness of Chekhov's description, the concreteness of the objects and the relationship that he describes, seems to summon abstract, nearly philosophical concerns. Hass writes, "What we see clearly is not perhaps the heart of the reality toward which the image leaps, but the quiet attention that is the form of the impulse to leap." The meaning of the image per se is less than the focusing power of an image so well honed.

- Fischli & Weiss previously discussed on this blog [here](#)
- Info on Robert Hass [here](#)
- A poem by Quinn Latimer [here](#)

10 Comments

1. As we began our dialogue,I snap the psyche.

hello from the other side of the river

Comment by [meira](#) — April 9, 2007 @ [2:58 am](#)

2. This reminds of how I feel when a distant relative or a new friend asks me what I photograph. I want to be sincere and offer a concise set of elemental words but usually end up just describing the view camera. A mentor of mine told me once that he always answered "Nouns." Or "Proper Nouns."

Comment by [Jesse Chehak](#) — April 9, 2007 @ [9:03 am](#)

3. Hey, Keith wrote Satisfaction while on tour in Florida and Mick then wrote the words. Brian Jones had nothing to do with that.

I know this is pointless, but it's the first thing I thought when I saw the piece.

I still very much like the idea of it.

Comment by [Danny G](#) — April 9, 2007 @ [10:24 am](#)

4. Roe Ethridge and Wolfgang Tillmans seem to both be doing fairly well and they are neither dead nor at the end of a career. Annette Kelm is another example of someone who can mix it up. Fischli and Weiss do tend to group their photographic projects into cohesive series like the double exposure flowers, the airports, and the apartment building pictures. IF one end of the spectrum to avoid is the line of matted prints, all the same size, than the opposite end is just as dangerous, the overly confident cavalier style, of nothing tangible holding the pictures together at all,which at times can seem trendy and forced. Editing is a highly underrated part of the process. The filmmaker Robert Bresson said "An image only matters in relation to other images".

Comment by [Chester McCheeserton](#) — April 9, 2007 @ [10:54 pm](#)

5. Chester, I was hoping someone would come up with a well reasoned counter argument. You make a very good point and your examples of Tillmans and Ethridge are correct. Thanks.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — April 10, 2007 @ [1:42 am](#)

6. What about Friedlander? What hasn't he photographed? He's taken on every imaginable subject matter often times subjects one would think are exhausted or cliché, for example: flowers – what does he do? Photographs the stems and the reflections and the refracted light. Now, I never look at a vase of flowers the same way. Friedlander has made such a wide range of subjects coherent and distinctly his own.

Comment by [ej](#) — April 10, 2007 @ [10:34 am](#)

7. I don't know if you're still in Paris but if so and want to try the most delicious hot chocolate ever go to Angelina on rue de Rivoli, near the Louvre. They make it with melted chocolate and real cream. The chocolat Africain is made with dark chocolate and is really good. The whipped cream hair do's of the ladies who go there are the visual treat.

Comment by [eve black](#) — April 10, 2007 @ [4:18 pm](#)

8. Easter in Paris is so amazing. I love your photographs taken alongside the Mississippi so of course I wonder who you may have photographed along the Seine. Hav4 you met the man who has the

flat under the bridge over the Seine? Its close to the Isle de la Cite. The many times I've seen his door I've only seen him sitting in a chair outside once – around Easter.

Comment by [AOK](#) – April 10, 2007 @ [9:11 pm](#)

9. Chester McCheeserton from pro wrestling? WrestleMania 16 Arrowhead Pond, Anaheim, CA (April 2, 2000?) please let it be so.

sounds like its a question of how transparent different artists processes are. the great thing for me about Fischli & Weiss is the humor and then the big huh? or somethimes the other way around. if not humor, then beauty, sometimes both.

a lot of photography series, when presented with its ducks all in a row, tidy and concept driven, kinda sucks the air out of things.

Comment by [stewart](#) – April 11, 2007 @ [11:46 am](#)

10. I suspect that Tim's argument is accurate too. If Fischli & Weiss were working in a strictly photographic context.

Comment by [Exhibition displays](#) – April 12, 2007 @ [2:48 am](#)