The Furtive Gaze

May 8 - July 12, 2003

1. Camera Work, Vol 30
2. Chicago Journal, 5. 8. 2003
3. Chicago Reader, 6. 27. 2003
4. Chicago Sun Times, 5. 9. 2003
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The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College of Chicago

MAY 8 – JULY 12, 2003

by MARGARET HAWKINS

The act of taking a picture has always contained the potential for secrecy and stolen images, and this potential has only grown as the science of the art has become more sophisticated. Early on, primitive peoples intuit the dangers of the medium; more recently paparazzi-plagued celebrities and unwitting surveillance subjects routinely experience them.

The photographer can snap a picture across a room or through a window without the subject even knowing he was seen, let alone captured on film. And the speed and accuracy of the camera provides unique opportunities for stealing a subject's image in a way that would never be possible for an artist working in a slower, less precise medium. Add to this ease of execution the disproportionate authority assigned to the photograph, the lingering idea that the camera doesn't lie, and you have a potentially powerful technology in the hands of just about everyone.

So the photographer-as-spy is a natural subject for the artist. The Furtive Gaze, last summer's exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, explored this notion of the camera as a hidden, stealthy eye. The show consisted of work by five photographers: Shizuka Yokomizo, Chris Verene, Melanie Manchot, Merry Alpern, and Sophie Calle, who use secrecy, deception, or, more often, a combination of them, to capture their subjects.

Yokomizo's series Dear Stranger (1998–2000) was the first to be shown. Her photographs show the photographer contacting potential subjects by anonymous letter and, if they agreed to be photographed, asked them to stand in their apartment window at night with the lights on.

The collaborative nature of this process makes for some very interesting images. Each subject wears a look of engagement and curiosity. Their expressions reveal the intensity and focus of traditional portraits, but there is also a hint of the lonely introspection that can sometimes be captured in an anonymous shot on a late night train. These people are both alone and not alone, and Yokomizo's ability to show both states at once is a canny and subtle accomplishment.

Verene's series Camera Club (1995–97) relies on a different level of secrecy, based as it is on deceit. He joins camera clubs—those organizations wherein man pose as fashion photographers to get attractive young women to pose for them in sexy outfits—and then uses his insider status to focus on the men instead of the girls.

Verene sets up his camera so that he manages to capture both the girls and the guys ogling them. It's a creepy scenario any way you look at it, and, as underhanded as it may seem for Verene to pose as a participant to catch these men in their sweaty moments of Peeping Tomism, we forgive his deceit since it exposes the equal or greater deceit of his subjects.

But the possibility for deceit goes full circle. If the photographer is tricking his or her subject, he could be tricking us, too. He pretends to his fellow camera clubbers that he's one of them, there to ogle sexy girls, while winking at us, the viewer, to say he's really a documentarian, there to record the naughty exploits of the cameramen. The viewer who stays with these photos long enough, though, will eventually see it's not so simple.

Verene is every bit as much a voyeur as the men he observes, maybe more. And what about us, standing there safely in a museum looking at Verene looking at the men looking at the girls? Perhaps the point of the show is this: we who enjoy photographs are all voyeurs, taking pleasure in the opportunity to spy on the vulnerabilities of others without being exposed ourselves.

Manchot's video For a Moment Between Strangers (2001) uses a hidden camera to explore some of the same territory, as she records herself meeting strangers on the street to kiss her. Some do so enthusiastically while others are embarrassed or disgusted. None realize that this intimate encounter has been recorded in a hypnotically monotonous loop of query, kiss, query, kiss.

One aspect of this kind of photography that doesn't get discussed very much is ethics. Is it fair to take pictures of people who don't agree to be photographed? And if it generally is, are there circumstances in which it is not? What about the right to privacy, especially concerning the body? Is it okay to photograph people without their knowledge as long as they have their clothes on? What about children?

A few years ago this same museum took this ethical issue to the very edge of tolerance with The Beshouse (1997), a series of photographs taken by Katarzyna Kozyra using a concealed camera in a...
Budapest bathhouse. Here the subjects were not only unaware of being photographed, but they were naked, many of a physique or an age that might lead us to believe that for reasons of modesty or tradition they would have been unwilling to be photographed had they been asked.

The show was delicious, a guilty pleasure. The women were presented considerately, even lovingly. We saw them drying their feet, resting their weary bones on benches, showering. There was nothing incriminating in the photos—but still. It hardly seemed fair to invade the privacy of elderly Old World women bathing themselves in what they believed to be the relative privacy of their community bath. On the other hand, the photos were about the beauty of the unself-conscious body. They make us love these naked old women, while Verene's make us despise his sneaky, horny men.

I felt the same queasiness about the hidden camera Alpern smuggled into high-end department store dressing rooms to catch views of women squeezing the cellulite on their thighs in her Shopping series (1997-99). It is when she violates the privacy of the body, especially around the sensitive issue of women's vanity and self-image, that her photos are at their most invasive, but also when they are most interesting and revealing.

Calle thoughtfully turns the issue of spying upside down in two series of photos. One is Suite Venitienne (1980), the series she made after secretly following a stranger to Venice and then basically stalking him until he caught her. Shown alongside is Le Filature (The Shadow, 1981), shot not by her but by a private detective she engaged her own mother to hire to track her. In this series Calle puts herself in the shoes of the spied-upon subject, though with the distinct advantage of knowing she is being followed. Here we get flat Joe Friday descriptions of her comings and goings paired with murky shots of her visiting a cemetery and meeting a friend for coffee. As mundane as her activities are, the grainy romantic photos unintentionally lend an aura of drama to what was in fact an ordinary day. In this way Calle illustrates how presentation colors facts more than we like to admit and how, whether true or illusory, often it is the image that lingers long after the last word is spoken.

Margaret Hawkins is a writer and critic who covers art for the Chicago Sun-Times and serves as Chicago correspondent for ARTnews.
Columbia College Chicago presents *The Furtive Gaze*, Thursday 5/8 through Saturday 7/12, with an opening reception Friday 5/9 from 6 to 10 p.m., gallery talks Friday 5/9 at 7 p.m. and Thursday 5/22 at noon, and a film screening of *Rear Window* Monday 5/12 at 6 p.m. (1104 S. Wabash Ave.) at The Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan Ave. (312/344-7104); *The Clear Valley Incident, 1615-2003*, a photographic installation by Despina Meimaroglou, through Friday 5/16 at A+D 11th Street Gallery, 72 E. 11th St. (312/344-6156); and *Trace Elements*, the first of two interdisciplinary graduate thesis shows, through Thursday 5/22 at the Center for Book and Paper Arts, 1104 S. Wabash Ave., 2nd floor (312/344-6630).
THE FURRIE GAZE

At the Museum of Contemporary Photography through July 12

By Bill Simon

Photography

They Like to Watch

When I heard yelling, I turned to see a woman standing by the window and
saw a man across the street peering in. I quickly turned
around but he was still there. I ran outside to see if he
was watching me, but he was gone. I wasıp quick to
react but then I saw him again. He was looking
through the window again.

They were walking down the street when suddenly a
man jumped out of the car and began to chase after
them. I tried to call the police but he was already
out of sight.

I heard a noise coming from the upstairs of the house
next door. I ran over and saw a woman looking out the
window. She said something to me and then ran back inside.

I heard another noise and ran back to the window. The
woman was still there but the man was gone.

I noticed a black car parked outside the house. I ran
outside to see if there was anyone in the car but there
wasn't. I ran back inside and closed the door.

I heard another noise coming from the upstairs. I
looked out the window but didn't see anyone. I heard
another noise and ran back to the window. The
woman was still there and the man was gone.

I heard another noise and ran back to the window. The
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I heard another noise and ran back to the window. The
woman was still there. I heard another noise and ran
mother to hire a private detective to shadow her. “This work turns the tables on the concept of photographer as voyeur. Here, the artist assumes the role of the observed person,” said Irvine.

The exhibit begins with some historical works, such as Walker Evans’ 1930 subway portraits and Garry Winogrand’s “Women Are Beautiful” portfolio. Melanie Manchot walked through streets of cities asking random strangers to give her a kiss. Their responses ranged from disgust to playful consent.

“The camera has proven itself the perfect tool for the delicious pleasure of witnessing someone caught off guard,” said Irvine. “Cameras [over the years] have been built into purses, walking sticks, pocket watches, men’s ties, and in one noticeably twisted case, molded into the shape of a revolver.”

An opening reception will be held from 5 to 8 p.m. tonight. The museum is at 600 S. Michigan. The exhibit will run through July 12. Admission is free. Call (312) 344-7104.

Cutting-edge art: Two exhibits, prints by Whitney Bradshaw and paintings by William Alexander, will open today at the International Museum of Surgical Science.

Bradshaw, in Scars, explores the body’s surface utilizing a close-up camera lens. The unexpected scale of the work becomes unsettling as one realizes the subject is a scar.

Alexander’s Madman Series focuses on the human face to convey torment and anguish.

A free reception will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. today. The museum is at 1524 N. Lake Shore. The exhibit will run through Aug. 25. Admission is $6 for adults and $3 for students and seniors. Admission is free on Tuesdays. Call (312) 642-6502.

Rare sky show: The Adler Planetarium will host free telescope viewing of a total lunar eclipse from 9 p.m. to midnight Thursday. Astronomers will be on hand to answer questions. Inside the museum, the details of the eclipse will be explained in Sky Theater presentations ($5 each).

A total lunar eclipse occurs when the full moon passes into the shadow of the Earth. The moon doesn’t disappear completely when it enters the dark shadow of the Earth. The atmosphere bends some sunlight around the edge of the Earth, so the moon seems to change color as it moves into the shadow. The color of a lunar eclipse depends on how much dust and pollution is in the atmosphere at that time. The moon may appear dark brown, deep red or bright orange.

The museum is at 1300 S. Lake Shore. Call (312) 922-STAR.
‘Gaze’ exhibit artists get behind the lens

Voyeuristic photographs have human-interest appeal, says associate curator

An exhibition featuring five contemporary artists who recorded voyeuristic glimpses into the lives of strangers, is being hosted by The Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan Ave. The exhibit, titled “The Furtive Gaze,” opened to the public on May 8, and will run until July 12.

David Carroll, manager of development and marketing of the museum, described the May 9 debut of “The Furtive Gaze” as a success.

“The opening went very well. Over 250 people attended and it brought dealers from all over the world that were interested,” Carroll said.

Works on display resemble the use of a hidden surveillance camera. One focus was privacy boundaries, as the five artists—Merry Alpern, Sophie Calle, Melanie Manchot, Chris Verene and Shizuka Yokomizo—hid their photography tools to a certain extent. Whether it was concealing cameras, using false motivations or concealing their identity.

Karen Irvine, associate curator at the museum, said that voyeuristic photographs have a human-interest appeal. “This has been the purpose of photography,” she said. “Artists who use their cameras to deceive.”

Such deception included Verene’s work, “Camera Club,” which is highlighted in the exhibit. Verene took on the subject of young women lured into nude or semi-nude modeling by groups of men purporting to be professional fashion photographers. He posed as one of the “camera club” photographers and used his camera to capture the expressions of those creating the false motivations.

In preparation for her series, “Stranger,” Yokomizo sent an anonymous letter to her subjects. The letter asked the participants to stand outside their front window at a specific time and date. Yokomizo then arrived to photograph for a few minutes and then left. The subjects never met the photographer or knew the activity they were participating in.

Vanity and consumerism ideals were caught on still videocassette with Alpern’s “Shopping” photographs. A plastic shopping bag held a concealed video camera as Alpern visited luxury department stores. Visuals of women absorbed in their shopping activities were attained and printed as video stills.

French artist Sophie Calle turned the tables in her piece included in the exhibit. A private detective was hired to report Calle’s daily activities and surroundings. She became the object of observation for the voyeuristic photography series, “The Shadow (La Filature).”

And Manchot explored an intimate interaction with strangers as she walked through streets throughout the world asking random people for a kiss. A hidden lens on the shoulder strap of a bag taped their responses. “For a Moment Between Strangers,” displays the range of disgust, dismissal and good-humored compliance to Manchot’s request.

“All of the artists were really excited and willing to participate when asked to do this,” Irvine said.

The work displayed at the museum is for sale through the galleries, which represent the artists. The museum is free and open to the public Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday until 8 p.m., and Saturdays from noon to 5 p.m.