PRESS COVERAGE

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech photography reconsidered
January 29 — March 28, 2010

1. Art Margins, 1.21.2010
2. Art Margins, 5.3.2010
3. Chicago Tribune, 1.3.2010
4. Flavorpill 2.16.2010
5. Flavorpill 2.18.2010
7. New City Art, 2.22.2010
8. New City Art, 3.1.2010
This exhibition brings together the work of six contemporary Czech artists (two of whom work collaboratively). All of these featured artists reflect on the materials of photography and find poetic resonance in a lack of obviously poetic subject matter. As the analog technology of photography fades away, these artists subversively employ a variety of photographic materials to investigate the potential for photographic veracity, and all of them push the idea of framing and selection to counter any perception of objectivity the medium might impart.
50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered at 1...

http://artmargins.com/index.php/exhibition/575-50-grey-exhibit...

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago (Exhib. Review)
Susan Snoddgrass (Chicago)
Published: 03 May 2010 20:36

In 1999, ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Piotr Piotrowski described the former East as “the grey zone of Europe.” “There is no doubt that the historico-geographical coordinates of Central Europe are in a state of flux,” he writes, “that we are experiencing both historical and geographical transformation, that we are between two different times, between two different spatial shapes.”[1]

50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered is co-curated by Karel Čífor, an independent curator in Prague, and Karen Irvine of the Museum of Contemporary Photography. The exhibition situates current strands of Czech photographic practices within this “grey zone,” exploring the conceptual and geographic spaces of being-in-between. Works by Stepan Grygar, the collaborative duo Lukas Jasansky and Martin Pelak, Marketa Othova, Michal Pechousek, and Jiri Thyn are positioned within a trajectory that connects them to Czech photographers of the classical avant-garde, whose innovative works were on display in a separate show on the third floor gallery.

United by a penchant for working mainly in black and white and with more traditional darkroom printing techniques, as opposed to more digitized processes, these artists reflect upon the medium itself, using traditional technologies whose potential, the curators argue, have not been exhausted. In several works, everyday images, including street scenes, still lifes, and various interiors record aspects of place, yet are divested of any symbolic meaning in compositions that occupy a nebulous space between abstraction and representation. Thus, photography becomes a material, conceptual expression instead of a documentary one.

While Piotrowski provides a political metaphor for contextualizing these artists’ works, the exhibition’s title is actually taken from the series 50% Grey (2009) by Thyń, examples of which are included here. Two gelatin silver prints from the subseries Tinted/Test Strip, a plant-filled courtyard and a female nude, are composed from vertical test strips, a zone system created by Ansel Adams in which film is exposed for “middle grey” to achieve the best image values between black and white.[2] In the photo installation Positive-Negative, also from the same series, Thyń reduced photography to its basic elements: class negatives six-screened with colorful patterns and black-and-white photographs made from the same negatives, which were then placed side by side on shelves attached horizontally to the wall. Other works, such as three unrolled C-prints depicting the artist’s worktable and 4 Corners of the Hilton Hotel (2007-08), in Prague, emphasize the geometry of each scene.

In their well-known, black-and-white series Abstractions (1994-95), Jasansky/Pelak similarly reduce simple objects—like a plaid seat cushion, a metal toolbox, a potato, or two dice—to their basic formal essence. Shot in extreme close-up and in a straightforward style that has become the artists’ trademark, these objects are distilled...
from their domestic origins and reside in the realm of the nonobjective. The same strategy is applied to the twenty-five works from their more recent series Brussels Sprouts (2007). The artists were invited to make a public work for the European Parliament in Brussels. However, they instead opted to photograph their existing art collection, mainly gifts from other countries. Shot with a cool, distant eye, the artists edit the nationalist content from the works in the Parliament’s collection; yet, this position of aesthetic neutrality is, in itself, a political act.

Othová’s photographs share certain affinities with those of Jesenský/Polák, in which quotidian objects become studies in form and visual perception. Often working in a serial format, Othová pairs similar or related images, creating oppositional plays not unlike Thyn. In one untitled work, a light-hued floral still life is presented against a dark backdrop, in tandem with an image of the same still life rendered in dark hues against a light backdrop. In Lecon de photographie (2007), a simple white box is shot within a shallow white field in a series of seven gelatin silver prints stacked vertically. There appears to be little variation, except for the changing position of the box’s lid. Shunning any interest in photography as a record of reality, Othová reveals, instead, the varying and rich tonalities of white, as well as photography’s ability to manifest its own self-referential narratives.

Grygar’s liminal photographs also elicit active viewing across sequential images. A street scene captured from above is repeated in six C-prints that comprise Street (Prague), 2002. Shot at night during a snowstorm, the view below is veiled by a pattern of snowflakes and light from the artist’s own flash, creating an abstract composition that reinforces photography as an aesthetic versus documentary medium. This idea is taken further in an untitled series in which a cardboard box cut with rectangular squares becomes a prop for perceptual investigations in geometry, form, and light.

The serial explorations of Othová and Grygar are extended in the works of Michal Peichlacek, whose black-and-white series Filmogram #1 (2007) and color digital projection Peter Moster (2005) occupy the grey zone between photography and film. Didactic text states that the title of the latter is the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer; ironically it also refers to a kind of elevator lift. Still images of a young man on a ladder and various objects (books, vases, busts) artfully arranged on shelves continuously scroll up and down, suggesting an interplay between the secular and the spiritual.

Formal connections between the works by artists represented in 50% Grey and those by key figures of Czech modernism were reinforced in the companion exhibition Recent Acquisitions of Czech Photography from the Beruch Foundation. Anne and Jacques Baruch opened a gallery in Chicago in 1967. The following year they went to Prague, initiating a life-long passion for and dedication to Czech art, despite political odds. Some 200 photographs were gifted to the Museum of Contemporary Photography, forty-four of which were on view, including works by František Drtikol, Josef Ehn, Emilia Mecklová, Jaroslav Rossler, Jan Saudek and Josef Sudek, among others. Despite the art historical links suggested above, 50% Grey is not a portrait of national identity. Rather the exhibition places current Czech photography between past and present, as a means for engaging both artist and viewer in zones of productive flux.
ART

Art illuminates the darkest season

Visual bright spots to enjoy in bleak weather

By Lauren Viera
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Who says art is dead in winter? Here are 10 visual bright spots during our bleak weather:

Anna Shteynshlyger photographs at Renaissance Society. Taking a cue from last fall’s Allan Sekula show, the Ren again, presents the work of an photographer who captures culture by shooting. 220 S. Ellis Ave., 773-702-8770; rene.northwestern.edu; through Feb. 14

“Picturing the Studio” at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Sullivan Galleries. Every great work begins in the studio. That’s the loose theme behind this show featuring more than 30 artists. 33 S. State St., 3rd Floor, 312-622-6605; saic.edu; through Feb. 13

Gael Otero at Kavi Gupta Gallery and Chicago Cultural Center. The season always attract painter Otero is featured at two very different venues simultaneously? This 38-year-old is on something big. Kavi Gupta Gallery, 835 W. Washington Blvd., 312-442-0705; kavigupta.com; through Jan. 30. Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St., 312-744-3547; explorinchicago.org; Jan. 23-March 24

“A Room of Their Own: The Bloomsbury Artists in American Collections,” at Block Museum of Art. While E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf were penning novels, others in their Bloomsbury group were busy with paintings, drawings and decorative objects. More than 200 works are here. 45 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, 847-467-4600; blockmuseum.northwestern.edu; Jan. 15-March 14

Andreas Fischer, “Ghost Town” at Hyde Park Art Center. Chicago-based Fischer has called his most recent works from Gold Rush-era portraits of average folks, bringing them to life with bright patches of color and an eerie penchant for shadows. 3401 S. Cornell Ave., 773-324-4125; hydeparkart.org; Jan. 21-Feb. 27

Recent Acquisitions of Czech Photography From The Baruch Foundation, at Museum of Contemporary Photography. Until its close in 2008, the local gallery run by Anne and Jacques Baruch collected and housed all the Czech photography worth viewing. 600 S. Michigan Ave., 312-395-6007; mcps.org; Jan. 29-March 18

The Papercut Haggadah by Archie Granot at Loyola University Museum of Art. Granot has been cutting art from paper for 30 years, including this wildly modern, graphic interpretation of the Haggadah—the historical Jewish text that tells the story of Passover. 600 N. Michigan Ave., 312-915-7600; luc.edu/luma; Feb. 10-May 9

“The Darker Side of Light: Arts of Privacy, 1850-1900,” at Smart Museum of Art. This traveling exhibition of prints, drawings and small sculpture features works never shown to the public, plucked from the collections of researcherly Europeans. 5555 S. Greenwood Ave., 773-702-0600; smartmuseum.uchicago.edu; Feb. 11-June 13

William Eggleston, “Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008,” at Art Institute. One of the early pioneers of color photography, Eggleston is celebrated in this mega retrospective—his first in the United States. 111 S. Michigan Ave., 312-443-3600; artic.edu; Feb. 27-May 23

White Light at Museum of Contemporary Art. Here’s your chance to go backstage with local electric-eletric duo White Light, which takes over the MCA’s 12-by-12 space with a multilayered soundscape installation. 220 E. Chicago Ave., 312-360-0050; mcachicago.org; March 6-28
Art: Photography

50% Grey

When
Jan 29 – Mar 28
Mondays–Wednesdays (10am–5pm)
Thursdays (10am–8pm)
Fridays–Saturdays (10am–5pm)
Sundays (noon–5pm)

Where
Museum of Contemporary Photography (600 S Michigan Ave, 312.663.5554)

Price
FREE

Details

Full of black-and-white photographs with unassuming subject-matter, mostly tacked to the walls without frames, 50% Grey is resolutely low-key. That’s not to suggest that this slice of recent Czech photography is by any means bland. It just requires you to embrace subtle perceptual experiments, conceptual juxtapositions, and unfolding changes (thus the prevalence of photo sequences). The six featured artists are often dealing with time and space, or the vagaries of photography itself; take Štepín Grygar, who repeatedly shot a single street view using different camera exposures so falling snowflakes transform the composition. On view also is a collection of Czech photographs spanning the last century, a reminder of the country’s rich history of photographic practice.

— Karsten Lund

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Film: Animation

Jiří Trnka

When
Thursday Feb 18 (6:15pm)

Where
Columbia College Chicago (624 S. Wabash Building, 6th floor, room 602)

Price
FREE

Details
http://www.mocp.org/events/2010/02/

It's difficult to overstate Jiří Trnka's impact on stop-motion puppet animation, from the Brothers Quay to fellow Czech Jan Svankmajer. Today, MoCP screens some of Trnka's surreal animated shorts, including his final masterpiece, The Hand (1965). An unassuming sculptor is attempting to craft a simple pot when a giant hand intrudes upon his modest home, reshaping the artist's clay into its own image. What initially feels like proto-Mr. Bill dark slapstick quickly becomes something more political. The hand eventually takes control of the artist's television and newspaper, attaches marionette strings to his body, tosses him in a cage, and directly manipulates his work. The anti-Stalinist subtext wasn't lost on the government: this magical, 18-minute polemic was banned for nearly 20 years.

— Stephen Gossett
January 29 - March 28, 2010

50% GREY: CONTEMPORARY CZECH PHOTOGRAPHY RECONSIDERED

Stěpán Grygar / Jasanský/Polák /
Markéta Othová / Michal Pěchouček /
Jiří Thyň

MoCP
Museum of Contemporary Photography

600 S. Michigan Ave.,
Chicago, Illinois 60605
312 663 5554
mocp@colum.edu
mocp.org

Columbia
College Chicago

Markéta Othová, Untitled, 2008, Courtesy of the artist and Jiří Švestka Gallery, Prague
Review: 50% Grey: Contemporary Czech Photography Reconsidered/Museum of Contemporary Photography

RECOMMENDED

Tenaciously resistant to postmodern cultural play, the six contemporary Prague-based Czech photographers who have been brought together here by curators Karel Císař and Karen Irvine continue their country’s poetic modernist tradition with evocative black-and-white and color images of ordinary objects, moody spaces and mild constructivist angle shots that exude worn, tired and poignant emotions that are mirrored in their subjects. Although the curators advise that the show “represents a small, very specific slice of photography in the Czech Republic today.” It remains that such works are rarely being made elsewhere at the present time and are a throwback to the golden age of Czech photography between the two world wars. The restrained mundane sensibility, in which decay is never so rife as to resemble ruins, is most perfectly captured in Marketa Ochova’s study of a shiny tiled floor littered with a few dispersed scraps of foam board that appear to have fallen from the ceiling, signaling disrepair that has not come anywhere near the brink of destruction. While the world outside Western Europe forges ahead with bold experiments, these artists look backwards and are frozen into pillars of the past. (Michael Weinstein)

Through March 28 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan.
RECOMMENDED

From 1967 through 2002, Chicago's Baruch Gallery played a unique role as the only space outside Czechoslovakia that specialized in showcasing that country's rich photographic tradition. In putting images from the Baruch collection's deep reserves on public display at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, curator Karen Irvine has performed a service by exposing the Czech modernist tradition's variety, ranging from the grandmaster Jan Sudek's emotive studies of cityscapes and intimate landscapes, through Jaroslav Rossler's cubist abstractions, to Jan Safarik's kinky and decadent surrealist scenarios shot in his basement studio during the Communist era. Spanning the period between the first world war and the early post-Communist years, the images here by nine of the most important Czech photographers will convince the viewer of the pertinence of the widespread critical judgment that mid-twentieth century photography was dominated by France, Germany, the United States and Czechoslovakia. Look at Sudek's deep and clouded study of a strand of trees in the mist and you will know why Anne Baruch embraced and loved the Czech tradition for its "poetic modernism." (Michael Weinstein)

Through March 28 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan.