

ANDREA MEISLIN GALLERY  
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# SECOND CITY PSYCHASTHENIA

January 12 – February 18, 2012

Andrea Meislin Gallery is pleased to announce a new exhibition curated by Daniel Bauer. Including work by Steve Daly, Jose Ferreira, Gwynne Johnson, Susan Morelock, Kristin Nason, Learning Ross, Anna Shteynshleyger and Rob Swainston.



Steve Daly, *Moth on Fake Marble Tile Rendered in Halftone*, 2010

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But they will teach us that Eternity is the standing still of the present time, a *nunc stans* (as the schools call it); which neither they, nor any else understand, no more than they would a *hic stans* for an infinite greatness of Place.

*Leviathan*, IV, 46. As quoted by Borges in *Aleph*

What does it mean to pass through a city? How long does one stay? What is the residue left behind? Perhaps it is we who compose the residue while our doubles flee the scene leaving us in the lurch. Perhaps we are the residue. The Second City was all about passing through. Here commodities really knew how to dance. They danced to the music of the future. A future that existed as long as it could be bought and sold. By river, rail, road and air nothing was static, nothing remained in place. Anything that did not move was torn down.

What happens when the music stops? Do those passing through get stuck? Do we continue in the perpetual nowtime of a graceful ghost dance or do we stagger like zombies tripping over one another's feet? In the Second City the Louis Sullivan Stock Exchange is in the museum. As a sign of lost *élan vital* or evidence of an uncanny collective clairvoyance.

Motion and stability are still up for grabs. The Second City conjures trans-millennial debates on cosmology in their current vogue as urban theory. We inadvertently slip back and forth between the rival camps - Ptolemy and Copernicus. "Every photograph is a still life," Garry Winogrand once remarked, with camera to patrol the border between self and other. The supercooled liquid of the glass lens and the camera's electro-mechanical guillotine shutter still bear the brunt of negotiating the present collapse into our current surroundings.

The artists in this exhibition met in a City Within a City; in a grid of depersonalized confessionals, the networked interior of oversized cubicles that constitute the studios at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Part brothel and part clinic in both form and function. Accumulating and manufacturing symptoms.

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The reference is to Roger Caillois's infamous 1935 essay *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, in which the dissident Surrealist suggested that the phenomenon of insect camouflage should be compared to a type of schizophrenic psychic condition characterized as a "depersonalization by assimilation to space": an entropic loss of distinctions, of ego boundaries, of any bodily sense of inside and outside.

George Baker, *Piss Eloquent*

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Learning Ross. Documentation of *Duty and Distraction*, *Portraits of the Middle Management* 2011

Personal density . . . is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth. Temporal bandwidth, is the width of your present, your now. It is the familiar  $\Delta t$  considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are.

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

“Everything is familiar yet slightly out of scale in Chicago” a recently transplanted colleague from New York said to me outside a bar. I am not sure this applies strictly to size and space, I think Chicago may be slightly out of joint in temporal bandwidth as well. It is why essence manifests itself here. None of the artists here are from Chicago. As SAIC students, professors, and lecturers, their work was made before, during or after their stint at SAIC. Symptoms and residue. The depersonalization, doubling and absorption into milieu is part of the job description if you’re a professor and it is the inevitable residue of good education if you’re a student, part of the hyper stimulus of a rather large urban art school. These artists are just a bit more aware of the keenly extraterritorial position they inhabit in this city within a city.

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“... they know they have lost their way... they will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath of air is out of their bodies, and indeed they will remain in the place where they came to grief even after death, held fast by tiny claws that stiffened in their last agony, until a draft of air detaches them and blows them into a dusty corner.”

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

**Steve Daly** sent to me the following description of his photographs:

I found a moth. Its wings frayed at the edges. Its colors were unusual, or maybe not (I'm not an expert on these things), but I had the sense that it was something I hadn't seen before. Usually moths are monochrome, almost colorless. They dance on the periphery and then they disappear. Even when the occasional carcass, like this one, lands in a dusty corner, it remains an exception. Where do the others, the ones that pass through and aren't entombed in an apartment, or the ones that never make the mistake of coming inside, go to die? I thought it might turn to dust as soon as I touched it. But it didn't - it was dead, rotting but solid. I wondered what it would look like as a photograph. Photography gives the dead life.

Then I found an alley. I was looking for a vortex, a landscape without sky. That peculiar feeling only a huge metropolis can give you, the vertiginous in-between jamming the sensation of space. It pulls objects to the surface of the picture plane and deprives you of perspective. Later, I realized that the colors in the alley - a blue glass-and-steel building, brown brick buildings and an orange tiger-stripe paint job - were the same colors as the moth. Perhaps it was the recognition of the external by the internal. The landscape is the inverse of the moth. It's as if the moth exploded. Or the landscape could have been folded into the moth, like origami.

These are negotiations:

Internal/external.

Analog and digital.

Anxiety and pleasure.

Surface and surface.

Presence/distance.

Between and among objects.

Pathology.

The urban fabric.

Confrontation.

Crisis.

In *Wandering Thomas*, **Jose Ferreira** explores the notion of doubt embodied as a state between belief and disbelief. Through a series of photographs, ink drawings, and prints, he emphasizes a state of reality in which the mind remains suspended between two contradictory propositions, unable to assent to either. *Wandering Thomas* refers to Caravaggio's painting, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c.1602), where Saint Thomas is depicted as probing the wound of Christ in order to be convinced of his resurrection. Doubt is a common form of discord, with the rational part of one's thought involved in weighing evidence, without which belief has no real substance. Søren Kierkegaard suggested that, for one to truly possess belief, one would also require a questioning of those beliefs.

This concept is extended metaphorically in the works to domestic and urban spaces. These spaces can harbor a deep symbolic resonance of being in transition, of remaining constantly in-between and potentially unstable, confusing our sense of time and place. Similarly, a series of images of an unmade bed imply a state of restless ambiguity. The used sheets are reminiscent of long periods spent in convalescence, during which the body itself is unreliable.

A photograph of an urban park mimics the idealized landscape, a signifier of stability, but its shape can change momentarily by the odd placement of an object, a strange encounter, and the essential picture of nature itself is interrupted. Charles Baudelaire wrote in his poem "Correspondences," that passing through nature was passing through a "forest of signs." What kind of semiotic resonance does the manufactured landscape then hold?

In the series *Revisions*, **Gwynne Johnson** accentuates the disappointments and frustrations of memory through an accumulation of photographs of men who resemble her deceased father. Photographed from behind, these anonymous figures function as vaguely descriptive armatures upon which to perform acts of construction. The inevitable insufficiency of each photograph to close the gap between the depicted form and the absent figure drives the repetition of image making. In this pursuit of images, memories are replaced in quick succession as each father is erased by its successor, ultimately widening the rift.

The photographs are made at a race track, during the brief period that rational time is suspended, between the starting bell and the photo finish. While everyone is transfixed at the rail, Gwynne wagers on the wagers with a camera.

**Susan Morelock's** photograph *Masten*, from the series *Lakes*, is shot in the studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She writes about her work:

Emergency lights stream through a window and cast spells on the dreary winter glow otherwise occupying the interior. Geography and ghosts collide. Sullivan County, meet Pennsylvania, meet Chicago, meet Manhattan. I am moving back and forth between mediums and places - back and forth between water and light and dust.

There is ritual in looking, in photographing and in research. Joan Didion, asks, "Had he not warned me when I forgot my own notebook that the ability to make a note when something came to mind was the difference between being able to write and not being able to write?" I ask the same question about my camera and making photographs. Carrying the camera is an obsession. Without it, the specters of unmade photographs haunt me.

**Kristin Nason's** *Decoys* are responses to contemporary pressures for multiplicity and dispersion. These human scale objects, assembled from readily available cast off goods, function as tactical placeholders in a kind of on-going, simulated war game against unspecified opponents. Often constructed in haste, these mounds of materials serve as barely adequate fill-ins or covers in a playful defensive strategy of evasion and substitution, addressing the demands of a culture wherein singularity is a liability.

Nason's work functions as a data set in an ongoing investigation of what it means to be a squishy being in a world with hard edges. It is a response to grappling with life in the here and now, a place and time of frenetic hyperactivity that mandates a level of mechanization and consequent disembodiment.

Through physical engagement with common objects and materials, she explores the capacities and limitations of the body in relation to its environment. The range of materials and techniques she employs reflects the schizophrenic tendencies of contemporary culture. Thus, the work explodes outward as a seemingly erratic series of singular experiments, but when considered as a whole is a web of interrelated games situated at the interface of the self and a crash-test world.

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[Siegfried] Kracauer compares the modern hotel lobby to the traditional church - the one a shelter for the transient and disconnected, the other for the community of the faithful... Kracauer elaborates the distinction between what he terms *erfüllter Raum*, or the "inhabited space" of *Verknüpfung* (communion), and the void or empty space of physics, the abstract sciences, and of course of the ratio, or rationalized modern life. Shut out of the religiously bonded community, the modern urban dweller can rely only on spaces "which bear witness to his nonexistence." Detached from everyday life, individual atoms with no connection save their absolute anonymity, the hotel guests are scattered like atoms in a void, confronted with nothing...

Anthony Vidler, *Agoraphobia: Spatial Estrangement in Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer*.

In his work, *Duty and Distraction, Portraits of the Middle Management*, **Learning Ross**, currently a student at SAIC, literally measures and logs the distance of extraterritoriality in the hope of rendering it insurmountable. The Palmer House Hotel and The Art School both share an intersection at Monroe and Wabash in the heart of Chicago's downtown loop. Learning and his fellow art student assistants have set up an improvised portrait studio in a back room of the hotel and concentrate on documenting middle management. The camera and photo op are the MacGuffin. As the formal portrait takes place, the students engage the employees in informal conversation, which is carefully logged and transcribed. "The procedure itself" as Walter Benjamin relates to early long exposures "caused the models to live not out of the instant, but into it; during the long exposure they grew, as it were into the image."

The diametrical opposition of the hotel to the art school, the salaried masses to the bohemian art school students, begins as snark but the hostility of pseudo anthropology quickly collapses into anxiety. It is an exercise of internal tribal discipline. As a definition of "us and them," these sitters embody for art students the very idea of the collapse into a day job. The art students need them to be the "Other" but the proximity is a constant reminder that the white collar workers were drawn to the second city just as the students and their teachers were. Their portraits all intermingle on the wall with the anonymous and generic grey place holders for the "no shows." From Nadar to August Sander to Employee of the Month and back again.

Accompanying these are 18 published transcripts of the conversations that "developed" during the act of the studio portrait, as well as small scale videos of the employees reading off a computer screen the outline for the project. An accidental video of Learning anxiously preparing the setting for the photograph, eating lunch and awaiting an employee to enter is mixed in with the rest.

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**Anna Shteynshleyger's** path to Chicago and the SAIC took her first to Des Plaines, Illinois, *City of Destiny* (a selection from the body of work that bears the same name will be on view at the International Center of Photography). In her series *Escalator*, originally presented while a student at Yale University, she continuously descended, day in day out, a short staircase adjacent to an escalator at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York. Armed with a flash and a hand held medium format camera she "pops" random subjects as they ascend.

The work is reminiscent of the later series *Heads* by her teacher Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Hers is a snub nosed, point blank assault on the unsuspecting who are "called" out of their continuum while she orbits the Zone. His is premeditated, cartesian, long range sharpshooting. The difference is the tactile versus the telescopic. Looking at the two series is like seeing Jack Ruby take out Lee Harvey Oswald in advance.

It is necessary to walk through *A Stand In Color*, **Rob Swainston's** antechamber instillation, in order to enter or view the gallery space.

Between the big boom and the big bust, there remains one steady feature of the city landscape. The ubiquitous blue plywood construction barrier that blends into the environment like urban wallpaper. I am intrigued by the chroma-key blue of these barriers which in the realm of digital production, is a stand in color for anything else.

But the woodgrain begins to assert itself as the wood is weathered. There is a generic yet site specific aspect to these objects.

*A Stand In Color* is a reconfigured sculpture from the cloth and ghost prints used in the work *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, shown at the Socrates Sculpture Park, in the summer of 2011.

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These descriptions and texts were assembled, written, co-written and edited by Daniel Bauer and the participating artists.