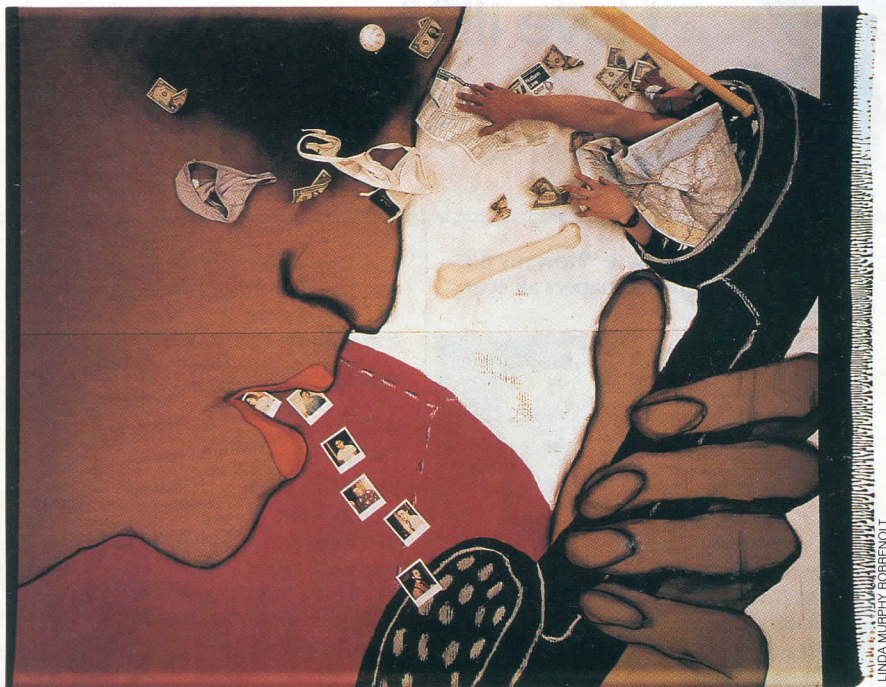


Instant Gratification

Paying homage to process: Polaroid at Photokina



"Garbage In—Garbage Out," a 20×24 Polaroid by Linda Murphy Robbenolt: self-referential—and good art.

Polaroid film was conceived as a snapshot medium—a panacea for the amateur photographer's frustration at having to wait for pictures. Yet, "instant" photography has, remarkably, been widely embraced by process-minded art photographers. Part of the reason for this acceptance is Polaroid's aggressiveness in promoting its products for artistic uses. And part of the reason may, ironically, have to do with the very limitations of instant films: Though they afford fewer creative options than conventional photographic materials, the imaginative stretch needed to make them work seems to challenge artists. The medium becomes a sort of test of creativity.

Ample testimony to this effect was provided by an exhibition of recent Polaroid pictures installed at last fall's biennial Photokina trade fair in Co-

logne, West Germany. Some of the most beautiful pictures in the Polaroid show, titled **"Selections 4,"** could just as well have been made with conventional films: Richard Edelman's gray studies of architecture and statuary in East Berlin and Richard Albertine's velvety views of the southern American landscape were both done in silver prints made from the sumptuous black-and-white negative provided by Polaroid Type 55 film. Yet without doubt the show's most interesting images explored the way Polaroid materials behave when they're pushed beyond their intended uses, and how that behavior can be used as an aesthetic tool. And even those artists not pushing felt compelled to acknowledge the uniqueness

of their chosen medium by making its hallmarks—for example, the distinctive chemical edge effects—a part of their images.

It's difficult to talk about any art without considering how process affects final form. With artwork created from Polaroid materials, though, it's virtually impossible. There's hardly an image in "Selections 4" that doesn't beg the question of how it was made. The most sensational example of instant film technology is the 20×24 Polaroid camera, and its products were well represented. The camera is a massive machine that requires a full-time technician to operate it, not to mention a crew to transport it on its rare outings. Thus, it's essentially a studio tool whose static nature forces photographers into conceptual modes—or into simple portraiture and still life. In the Photokina show, some artists in the latter group took advantage of the medium's ability to deliver finely rendered detail by making their work intensely busy. One of them, Frank Gillette, offered dense assemblages of shells and coral, dried flowers and bark, and hapless butterflies that evoked the airless quality of Victorian shadow boxes. His pictures' very flatness—the objects were arrayed in a single plane and seen dead on—was as much a solution to a unique technical problem as it was an artistic convention: The 20×24's depth of field is extremely shallow, and keeping the subject on a single plane disguises this.

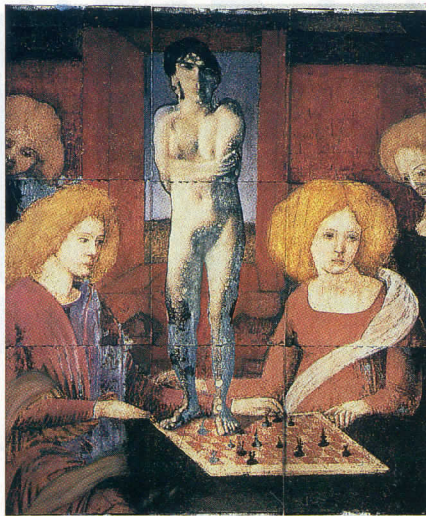
A similar strategy—and, among 20×24 Polaroid artists, a common means of dealing with the limitation of working in a studio—is to incorporate flat, painted surfaces into the subject. Yet the images in this vein displayed at Photokina were more than simply re-photographed paintings: Linda Murphy Robbenolt cuts holes in her painted corrugated cardboard, for example, allowing limbs and miscellaneous three-dimensional objects to emerge from

them. She then often flattens these protrusions by painting them in the same strokes and palette as the background surface itself. Such artistic devices play on the two-dimensionality of the Polaroid medium itself and question the assumption that the photographic image is necessarily more real than the painted one. One of the things that good art does is parlay a technical constraint into a statement about art itself.

Other 20×24 photographers in the show go the opposite route, playing up the large format by making images that depend for their effect on expansive passages of uninterrupted tone or color. Hans Hansen's flower studies have the minimalist quality of an Ad Reinhardt painting's squares of black and variations of black. The photographs are so underexposed that the petals barely separate from the background. The dark bodies of William Wegman's twin Weimarers merge into a black background in an effect so unrelieved that only the crescent-moon whites of their doggy eyes are visible. The viewer must work to read these pictures and is thus compelled to think about the artistic decisions that went into their making.

Such images may sound like mere aesthetic exercises—the equivalent of a musician playing scales rather than performing an actual work. And indeed, some of the images in the show weren't much more than that. Yet they were fascinating nonetheless. The nature of the instant-film medium—the immediate feedback it provides, the technical strictures it imposes—seems to encourage a kind of *practice* on the part of art photographers. And this is refreshing in an art world that places such a premium on the artwork as product.

Sequential or joined images made up a big part of the show. Topping the list was a 13-panel extravaganza by Evergon (beware of artists with only one name) called "Centaur Teaching the Young Hercules to Use the Bow and Arrow." If nothing else, the photograph's title suggests the epic scale that some Polaroid photographers are after.



Above: "Androgyne's Checkmate," by John Reuter—this is a Polaroid? Below: "Camp; Revisited, Katie," by Lewis Toby—process marks in a straight silver print.



One large-scale image by John Reuter was perhaps the most ambitious work in the show. Reuter has for years operated the 20×24 camera for its many supplicants and knows its potential like no one else. Among other things, he has mastered the difficult technique of transferring the negative half of the Polaroid instant-film sandwich to a separate sheet of paper before its dyes have had time to "migrate" to the positive receiving sheet. The transfer makes the film's ordinarily bright colors muted,

and when the negative is peeled away from the paper, it often pulls bits of the emulsion with it, giving the image a worn, or weathered, look. Reuter exploits this quality wonderfully: Many of his pictures are collages of reproductions of medieval paintings, and the peeling effect suggests the abrasions of time. The photographer further manipulates his surfaces with sandpaper, dry pigment, and graphite. The 5×6-foot piece shown at Photokina was a joining of nine separate 20×24-inch panels.

It's easy to be seduced by the scale and surface of the 20×24 images, but the show's smaller works deserved the closer look they required. These photographs came in a greater variety of physical forms than the larger ones, including cyanotypes, platinum and printing-out paper prints, and selectively toned 4×5 Polapan positives. Boston photographer Michael Lapidés even used the coating brayer supplied with his black-and-white film like a paintbrush, applying it selectively to the positive print—in one case, an image of rows of ladybugs—so that uncoated portions faded, or oxidized into a rich,

The imaginative stretch needed to make "instant" art seems to challenge.

bronzy hue. In fact, much of the manipulation in the show's small works was by way of introducing color into black-and-white images. But the small work also included color Spectra photographs, which are probably the least easily manipulated Polaroid images of all.

And that brings us back to the instant-film premise of immediate gratification—and to the irony that a medium dedicated to the pure, unadulterated image should have become such a provocative vehicle for photographic artists. "Selections 4" was a fascinating lesson in the way process figures in artistic thinking. The aesthetic here isn't instant at all. ■

"Selections 4," curated by Mark Haworth-Booth from work selected for the International Polaroid Collection by Barbara Hitchcock.