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'Critic's Notebook: For London, a Summer of Photographic Memory; Around the City, Images From Around the World'

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This city is immersed in photography exhibitions, a coincidence of scheduling, perhaps, that the museums here decided made a catchy marketing scheme. Posters and flyers advertise the "Summer of Photography."

Why not? I stopped here on the way home from the Venice Biennale, after which any exhibition that did not involve watching hours of videos in plywood sweatboxes seemed like a joy. The London shows leave you with no specific definition of what photography is now, except that it is, fruitfully, many things at once, which is a functionally vague description of the medium. You can nevertheless get a fairly clear idea of the differences between a good photograph and a bad one.

In the first category are two unlike Americans: Philip-Lorca diCorcia, with a show at Whitechapel, and Cindy Sherman, at Serpentine. Into the second category falls Wolfgang Tillmans, the chic German-born, London-based photographer, who has an exhibition at Tate Britain that cheerfully disregards the idea that there might even be a difference between Categories 1 and 2.

There is also the posthumous retrospective, long overdue, of Guy Bourdin, the high-concept soft-core-pornography fashion photographer for French *Vogue* and Charles Jourdan shoes in the 1970's and 80's, at the Victoria and Albert.

And as the unofficial anchor for it all Tate Modern, which until now had apparently never organized a major photography show, has tried in one fell swoop to make up for lost time with "Cruel and Tender: The Real in the 20th Century Photograph." The title is from Lincoln Kirstein's apt description of Walker Evans's work as "tender cruelty." Like Tate Modern in general, "Cruel and Tender" is vast, not particularly logical and blithely skewed.

It consists of two dozen or so solo shows strung together in what the museum hopefully calls "sympathetic clusters," beginning and ending with contemporary work, lest anyone leave Tate thinking that the art of the past might ever be as memorable as the art of the moment. The exhibition, helter-skelter, runs the chronological gamut from Evans and August Sander through Andreas Gursky, Rineke Dijkstra and other present art luminaries – with big gaps. We get Albert Renger-Patzsch, Fazal Sheikh, Paul Graham, Michael Schmidt and Boris Mikhailov. We do not get Atget, Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, Paul Strand, Sebastião Salgado, Avedon, Berenice Abbott, James Nachtwey or Robert Capa.

The given explanation for who's in and who's out has to do with tender cruelty: a philosophy of balancing "engagement and estrangement," as the show's catalog puts it. The philosophy is ostensibly shared among the photographers in the show. We're told they eschew sentimentality for "cold-eyed" observation.

If you know the huge, extravagantly grotesque and exploitative color photographs that Mr. Mikhailov takes of starving, homeless, drunken Ukrainians, whom he pays to take off their clothes and reveal their sagging flesh and scars – an antic parody on Soviet Socialist Realism that ends up making a mockery of the people in the pictures – you will know how slender is the thread of "cold-eyed" observation that binds these sort of pictures to the work of someone like Sander.

Did I mention that I enjoyed the show anyway? This is notwithstanding Mr. Mikhailov or some of the works of Mr. Schmidt, whose brutally stark pictures, hung erratically up and down walls as narratives enigmatically exploring German identity, establish him as an intellectual photographer. That said, his selfless insistence on exposing himself naked to the camera, while admirably frank, didn't happen to be what I was in the mood for after lunch.

So I reacquainted myself with the works of Evans, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus (whose photographs look humane next to Mr. Mikhailov's), Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth, Robert Adams, Garry Winogrand, Stephen Shore, William Eggleston and on and on. As for Lee Friedlander's photographs of office workers staring at their computer screens, a documentary project from the mid-1980's, I was put in mind of Mr. diCorcia's photographs of passers-by on the street, on view both at Whitechapel and also in "Cruel and Tender." Each photographer, although in very different ways, makes actors of people doing mundane things, the subjects' expressions given a baroque weight simply by virtue of being caught when the shutter clicked. They look struck by some shocking revelation that is unavailable to us.

We are each our own little universe of portent and mystery, these photographs remind us, which is also, from another perspective, a message in Fazal Sheikh's black-and-white portraits of refugees: beautifully plainspoken pictures that bear witness to people the world disgracefully tries hard to forget.

Who knows exactly what Mr. Sheikh is doing in "Cruel and Tender." His work is the opposite of cold-eyed, but I was glad to have found it there. It's an example of what concerned documentary photography, the tradition of Cartier-Bresson and Capa, who are not here, can still provide to humanity, of which the people in these pictures have seen precious little.

I won't linger over Ms. Sherman's photographs at Serpentine or over Mr. Tillmans's at Tate Britain. His cool, Warholian style, derived partly from his background in avant-garde fashion magazines, entails photographing anything: clouds; a man with a mohawk holding his penis; Kate Moss in a red dress; fruit; the Concord overhead; someone's armpit; an aerial cityscape; semiabstractions; two women kissing.

Call it weary sophistication. Mixing insouciance and abject indifference clearly impresses many people, including the jurors who gave him the Turner Prize a few years ago, but I left Tate Britain feeling a little weary myself.

On the other hand Ms. Sherman's show at Serpentine is engaging: a tendentious retrospective recognizing heroic talent that now stands maturely outside fashion. It includes a new series of works, digitally enhanced with psychedelic backdrops, in which she poses as a clown. Somehow, just barely, she manages to reanimate even this cliché.

Over the years Ms. Sherman has circulated an encyclopedia of female types. They're here. The works are not abstract social statements. They come from the gut. That has become clearer over time. Notwithstanding their artifice, they are intimate and honest dramas about the psychological burdens of life, borne by the women she plays in her pictures, who are weighed down by their absurd makeup and adopted roles, trying to put on the best face and usually failing.

They seem much more authentic and human than the people in Mr. Tillmans's photographs. Authenticity is an artistic matter, after all, not the automatic outcome of snapping whatever's in the viewfinder. In another way, Bourdin's photographs look authentic, too, despite being staged, like Ms. Sherman's work.

Bourdin was by various accounts a strange little man with a whiny voice and demanding temperament, who, I read in an article about him by Tim Blanks in the *New York Times Magazine*, forced his models to balance on rocks in the ocean during electrical storms, glued pearls to their

bodies until their skin couldn't breathe and they blacked out, and handcuffed them to beds. Everyone seemed to love to work with him.

He was, at least as much as Helmut Newton, responsible for bringing a feverish new brand of sex and violence to fashion magazines and advertising in the 1970's, capturing the marketably seedy spirit of that era in lurid colors, influencing multifaceted visual culture since. He became a cult figure.

All this evidently gave little satisfaction to Bourdin, who was abandoned by his mother as a boy and aspired unsuccessfully to be a painter after Balthus or Bacon. Unlike Mr. Newton, he couldn't have cared less about money or fame; he turned down prizes and refused to show his work in galleries or publish books of his pictures. So when he died of cancer in 1991, at 62, he had more or less orchestrated his own neglect. He seems to have had a contempt for his work that gives it its black-humored heat and true perversity.

The retrospective at Victoria and Albert, like a peep show, is laid out in two darkened rooms, with a short Bourdin film at the entrance showing a woman in lingerie spinning on a stool. The first to arrive one morning, I slunk past the earnest young woman reading a book and taking tickets. I didn't want to seem too eager. In the front room a few photographs were visible only through peepholes. The second room included Bourdin's early work: lean, geometrically abstracted landscapes and still lifes harking back to the work of photographers like Weston. The connections with the later commercial pictures entail both formal rigor and a pervasive loneliness.

Bourdin uncovered beauty in unlikely places and ugliness in the world of beauty. The taboos he flirted with were actually broken before he came on the scene. They are not what sticks in the mind about his work. Fashion is about masks and make-believe. Bourdin injected into it a degree of self-honesty, or self-loathing, the effect of which creeps up on you.

Talk about tender cruelty.

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