



Immense collection on a long pier

by Sura Wood

Nestled under the Bay Bridge and nearly hidden from sight, you'll find the entrance to Pier 24, one of the more extraordinary experiences available in San Francisco, especially for those who love photography. Several years ago, The Pilara Foundation, established by San Francisco investment advisor Andrew Pilara, splendidly renovated this sweeping, 28,000 sq. ft. annex, a storage warehouse space with exposed ceilings, light grey walls and a spectacular panoramic view of the bay, to house his collection of 3,000 photographs. Vacant for almost 30 years, the historic 1935 building, which sits next to remnants of railroad tracks that once shuttled shipping cargo to the Embarcadero, has been transformed into a temple for a serenely contemplative viewing of art. Although the interior is preternaturally quiet and climate-sealed, you can hear seagulls cruising over the bay outside, and fog horns, too.

Intimate in spite of its vast scale, the space is a little like an enormous city library, an impression reinforced by the hushed tones of the people seated at the front desk. Behind them hangs Richard Avedon's famous triptych self-portrait of the white-haired, casually elegant *eminence gris*. No more than 20-40 people are allowed inside at one time, and despite flying largely beneath the radar, 25,000 have come through since they opened their doors in 2010. Admission is free; visits, which last two hours, are by appointment only.

Pier 24 wouldn't appear to be a vanity project for Pilara, whose name is nowhere to be found in what has to be one of the most gorgeous pieces of real estate in San Francisco, and it's virtually impossible to persuade the staff to divulge much about the man other than that he began collecting pictures nine years ago with an inaugural purchase at the Fraenkel Gallery. The collection's purported emphasis is on changes in the industrial landscape as reflected in 20th- and 21st-century work, predominantly by a Who's Who of American photography: Arbus, Winogrand, Friedlander, Lange, Evans, Goldberg, Avedon, Sultan, Frank and others; a smattering of European, African and Asian artists are also on view. Anyone familiar with photography will recognize many of the images.

In keeping with the foundation's philosophy of a pristine, unfiltered environment for communing with pictures, none are titled or attributed to specific artists except in a few cases, and there's no text. This is a position I can understand, but I don't agree that knowledge detracts from enjoyment. There's benefit derived from recognizing authors of works and the opportunity to learn more about them. Seniors and recent art-school grads, some of whom better informed than others, are on hand as guides and equipped with a booklet containing background on the photographs, a supplement I would've preferred to access directly. To help navigate, you're given a brochure with a map when you enter.



Installation at Pier 24 Photography: a pristine, unfiltered environment.
(Photo: Tom OConnor, courtesy of Pier 24 Photography)

At Pier 24, it's the atmosphere that's singular. As a nonprofit, unconventional enterprise, their shows don't conform to the usual parameters, and writing about them poses a challenge. For instance, it's counterproductive to generalize about their latest exhibition *About Face*, which focuses on portraiture, when it's comprised of close to 1,000 images. They're displayed in 19 spacious galleries, some dedicated to single photographers, others to several. So I'm going to cherry-pick pieces that caught my eye, like Todd Hido's "Untitled" (2011). A study in tension between the prim and the wanton, it's a portrait of a doe-eyed brunette with a string of ladylike pearls around her neck, ample cleavage exposed by her black bra and open cardigan; Hendrik Kerstens, who uses his daughter as muse in different 3/4 poses, created "Hairnet" (2000), a color image of a doleful young woman whose pale complexion, contrasted with a dark background, is reminiscent of Dutch painting; Peter Hujar's "Queen with Fur Stole, Halloween" (1979) captures a foxy woman in fishnet gloves and veiled hat on the prowl, but the hairy forearms are a dead giveaway; and Hiroshi Sugimoto is represented by the six unfortunate and very dead wives of Henry VIII, photographs made from wax models with similar facial features and hands that are disproportionately large and masculine. At one end of the gallery, as if presiding at the head of the table, sits the mass murderer himself, the king. Avedon's series *In the American West*, a cast of outliers, con artists, drifters, criminals and a lone fat boy cradling a shotgun, photographed in uncharacteristically raw, large-scale black & white, is enhanced by the wide open spaces afforded by this venue. Larry Sultan's SF Society pictures, from a 2007 color photo shoot for *W* magazine, feature a regal Dede Wilsey posing in her pink and green mansion in a low-cut, green taffeta gown with a matching set of emerald and diamond jewels, while a solemn immigrant maid in a pink uniform lights pink candles in a nearby candelabra. Vanessa and Billy Getty, sometimes referred to as the *jeunesse doree* of the city's social set, are depicted in staged yet informal fashion; she sits on a table, her hair in rollers, next to a sculpture of a hollow horse's head into which their cat has stuck its head; the formidable Denise Hale stands in her Russian Hill apartment a few feet away from a tiger rug with bared teeth, who sacrificed his life against his will, I'm sure, to decorate her floor.

I particularly liked *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, a grouping of bent psychological self-portraits that includes Man Ray's image of Duchamp in drag, and Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, who uncannily reinvents himself as a voluptuous Marilyn Monroe in nude pin-up mode, posed provocatively on a blood-red background, exhibiting a pair of alarming fake breasts. Morimura also appears in a spooky rendition of Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring." Gillian Wearing, a British artist with an "artifice as path to truth" credo, dresses up in fearsome blonde wig, midriff scars and black leather as Andy Warhol, and has variously assumed the identities of her father, mother, grandmother, brother and Diane Arbus, whose 1944 self-portrait, where she appraises her naked pregnant body in a mirror, is also part of this show within a show. Some of these pictures are especially interesting to consider in the context of that other great pretender, Cindy Sherman, whose retrospective is at SFMOMA. If you have to budget your time, make sure to check out gallery #9 before you leave.

I spent a full two hours roaming around unhurried, without a trace of fatigue at the end of my shift. It's a credit to the curators and the painstakingly thought-out, beautifully executed architectural design that such an immense collection never feels overwhelming. I, for one, can't wait to return.

About Face and Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood will be up at least through Feb. 13, 2013, or perhaps longer. For further info and to make an appt.: www.pier24.org

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