

Embarcadero photography pilgrimage

By Sura Wood

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Since opening in 2010 in a vast, superbly renovated warehouse on the waterfront, Pier 24 has been a unique venue for photography. Its policy of admitting only 30 visitors at a time to the cathedral-like space affords a contemplative viewing experience unlike anything else in the city. But the size of the 28,000 sq. ft. facility and the volume of photographs it takes to fill it make the task of mounting cohesive shows there and the traditional reviewing of them a challenge. Though Pier 24 has primarily been a home for the expanding collection of its founder, San Francisco investment advisor Andy Pilara, it has featured small guest shows and recently curated its first exhibition devoted to the work of a single artist. For their current outing, *Collected*, they've devised a novel and effective structure that incorporates a host of photographs from the Pilara Foundation, and works belonging to nine Bay Area collectors, organized into what are essentially independent satellite shows that reflect their particular predilections and interests. Most sections are quite strong and filled with enough high-value treats to justify a pilgrimage to the Embarcadero.

As per Pier 24's purist experiential philosophy, none of the gallery images are accompanied by titles or attribution. The practice can be frustrating, but fortunately, a printed guide with the information is available at the reception desk, right next to Yasumasa Morimura's "Vermeer Study: Looking Back (Mirror)" (2008). The notorious, gender-bending, Japanese "sexual appropriation" artist has cast himself variously as Frida Kahlo and the reclining courtesan in Edouard Manet's "Olympia." Here he masquerades as the Dutch painter's "Girl with a Pearl Earring," and nearly pulls it off.

Richard Learoyd, an artist cultivated by Pier 24, is represented by a grouping of predominantly large-scale color portraits of people and animals, made with the labor-intensive, antique photographic process *camera obscura*. Among the standouts: an ineffably sad yet exquisite pink flamingo ("Flamingo 3," 2012), electrocuted after a tragic entanglement with power lines in South America. The British artist tapped his connections at

a natural history institution, which froze the exotic creature and shipped it to Learoyd. He suspended the lifeless bird on white cord, its feathers still vivid pink, its graceful neck and legs limp but intact, effectively resurrecting the beautiful corpse it left behind. In another image, a huge, bloody, white stallion's head, freshly decapitated from the look of it, rests on a white slab ("Horse Head," 2012).



The selections from Carla Emil & Rich Silverstein's *Solitude* convey aloneness or separateness. In Richard Barnes' "Unabomber Exhibit A" (1999), for instance, Ted Kaczynski's simple wooden shack, shot against a velvety black background, seems to float in a sea of impenetrable darkness, like the troubled psyche of its former occupant. The subject of Diane Arbus' "Woman at a Counter Smoking, N.Y.C." (1962), a true-blue New Yorker smoking a cigarette at the counter of a Manhattan coffee shop, emanates a "Don't bother me, get lost" attitude, and the rugged-featured Georgia O'Keeffe, attired in black and a skull cap, appears imperious and monastic, even when wedged between walls in a 1948 portrait taken by Irving Penn as part of his series on artists in corners.

Marcia Resnick re-imagines her boring adolescence as an infinitely sexier, more interesting affair in a pair of 1978 images: “She scotch-taped her nose up before dates hoping it would stay that way,” and “She would demurely sip cherry Kool Aid from a wine glass and puff on bubble gum cigarette.” Both are contained in *Dancing with Myself*, Winn Ellis & David Mahoney’s collection of rarely if ever exhibited female self-portraits of the 1970s. Be sure to check out Chara Schreyer’s provocatively titled section *Danger, Disaster, and Beauty*, where you’ll find Elena Dorfman’s “Rebecca 2” (2001), a color photo of a sexy woman’s crossed legs. But wait: what’s that tell-tale seam above her well-turned ankle? Why, it’s a sex doll, and judging from the wear and tear, one that’s gotten a whole lot of love.



Dan Holland & Patrick Printy contribute a set of fine black & white prints by Ralph Eugene Meatyard, who worked as a Kentucky optician when not photographing sinister images of rural children donning masks in dilapidated buildings. The rural setting is a constant in these pictures, as is a creeping sense of menace, but not the masks, save for one where a young man, standing alone in the woods, holds one away from his face as if he’s just removed it. Though Meatyard’s work has something akin to a secret society of admirers, it’s shown infrequently.

The same cannot be said of revered Swiss photographer Robert Frank, who has a gift like no other for the arresting image, and the ability to distill an unfolding narrative from an instant. He observes a congregation of gray middle-aged power brokers in overcoats and hats, facing sideways on a podium in “City Fathers Hoboken, New Jersey” (1955-56), and a less entitled gathering of black men in straw boaters and their Sunday best milling around old American sedans parked on grass (“Funeral - St. Helena, South Carolina,” 1955-56), two of three pictures here from Frank’s influential tome *The Americans*. On a lighter note, an inflated strongman is buoyed skyward by a hot-air balloon sailing over a parade on a city street (“Men of Air/New York #25,” 1948). All of the above are part of the Bluff Collection, noted for having the most significant holdings of Frank’s perfectly composed works in private hands.

Hiroshi Sugimoto can be cerebral and vague, teasing with riddles only he knows the answers to in works that seem like intellectual exercises, but “The Last Supper: Acts of God” (1999-2012), alone in a theatrically lit, darkened alcove, is enthralling. The piece, a five-panel rendering of the solemn scene of Jesus flanked by robed men, was damaged when the artist’s storage facility was flooded during Hurricane Sandy. Sugimoto not only didn’t repair the damage, he celebrated it as divine intervention. The stains, tears and deteriorating emulsion, looking like a peeling fresco in the background, give the work and the Biblical passage it’s based on, distance and gravitas. In one panel, Jesus sits at the table with his palms turned upward in a supplicating gesture, a diagonal crossing his torso like a sword of fate. The image is reminiscent of the doomed targets of the devil’s disciples in the 1976 film *The Omen*, who appeared in photographs with a similar sign that marked them for death.

Through Jan. 31, 2017. Appointments for two-hour slots can be made online at Pier24.org. Admission is free.