



Pier 24 presents the best of contemporary photography

By Max Blue Special to The Examiner
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Daniel Postær's "San Francisco, University Club," 2018.

Daniel Postær

In 2019, Pier 24 Photography mounted the first half of a two-part institutional retrospective, "Ten Years of Pier 24 Photography: Looking Back." That show surveyed the museum's collection, simultaneously offering a truncated history of photography. The recently opened second half of the

exhibit — “Looking Forward” — is a tastemaker of a show, sampling trends in the best of the best contemporary photography.

Whereas “Looking Back” was arranged thematically, “Looking Forward” subdivides the pier’s 28,000-square-foot exhibition space into 16 single-artist galleries, each revolving around a single project or theme in that photographer’s larger body of work. Even though they aren’t grouped thematically, it’s easy to see how these contemporary photographers are working in stylistic traditions.



Urban landscape photography takes up a generous portion of the show, revealing that as the landscape itself evolves and becomes cluttered, photography evolves with it. Daniel Postaer captures San Francisco’s urban sublime, particularly in “San Francisco, University Club,” 2018, which shows a familiar skyline behind an apartment building, a silhouette moving in the single lighted window. Here, photography both looks in and out at once, conveying the claustrophobia and expansiveness of city life.

A sterling representative of street photography, Austin Leong’s candid shots of quasi-surreal scenes feels like the work of a 21st-century Diane Arbus, snapping offbeat moments in San Francisco rather than Manhattan. And, as with Arbus, Leong’s pictures raise questions of the exploitation of their subjects (many homeless, others simply unwitting), ethical questions photography has long grappled with.

Another form of representation the show explores is identity, with Tania Franco Klein and Chanell Stone turning the camera on themselves. “It’s me controlling my own narrative,” Stone writes, relying on the fact that photographs contain narratives and implying that narrative, itself, can be photographic. This rings true in the age of social media, where almost any image might be composed with equal premeditation to Klein and Stone’s pictures. The difference here is that we see and appreciate the forethought that’s gone into Klein’s often-eerie color shots of her face distorted by frosted glass, her body by the surface of a swimming pool, or Stone’s lavish black-and-white prints of her semi-nude figure surrounded by foliage.

Erica Deeman and Eva O’Leary approach identity differently, in two similar series, riffing on mugshots and school portraits, respectively. Deeman’s “Brown Series,” is a grid of portraits of shirtless Black men, posed against a background matched to the artist’s own skin color. O’Leary’s grid of faces, “Concealer,” shows adolescent girls. Where Deeman avoids clothing as a signifier of class and status, O’Leary’s portraits emphasize the way identity is often accessorized or sold to young women via fashion.

Then there are the more process-oriented photographers, whose work inquiries into the nature of the medium itself. Tabitha Soren’s series “Surface Tension” treads in the waters of digital experimentation: photographs of fingerprint-smudged screens showing photographs from news and social media websites. One of the most disturbing images here is a familiar one: white nationalists marching with torches at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA. The evident fingering of the screen adds the titular tension: We’re all onlookers, often feeling powerless to affect a world we’re used to taking in through screens.

Daniel Gordon’s “Table Arrangements” are also photographs of photographs, but in a different way. Gordon creates the still lifes he photographs by printing and cutting out pictures of fruits and other objects he finds online. Viewers wouldn’t be tricked into thinking that the items here are the real thing, but we might be fooled into thinking the photos are digital collages rather than dioramas. This visual trick plants a seed of doubt, suggesting nothing is exactly what it seems in the easily manipulated world of photography.

All these genres have their art historical precedents and a place in the contemporary field. What comes most sharply into focus in “Looking Forward” is that photography’s major concerns are the same as they always were. There’s nothing entirely new here — only fresh perspectives on the timeless themes that define the medium: society, identity, authenticity. But the root of all of these is the essence of the photograph itself: mortality or, more specifically, the anxiety surrounding mortality that begets the inclination toward manipulating and preserving the present.

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IF YOU GO:

“Ten Years of Pier 24 Photography: Looking Forward”

Where: Pier 24, S.F.

When: 9 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Monday-Friday, through May 31, 2023

Tickets: Free, appointments required

Contact: 415-512-7424, pier24.org

Max Blue writes about the visual arts and modern culture for the San Francisco Examiner and other publications.