

Art in America

ROE ETHRIDGE

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ANDREW KREPS
by brian boucher

NEW YORK If you lie down with dogs, do you wake up with fleas? Or, how does a photographer cope with having taken business from a company that helped to wreck the economy? The latest show at Kreps by photographer Roe Ethridge seemed to offer an oblique answer. In “Le Luxe,” which shares its name with two Matisse paintings and included large C-prints as well as two sculptures, he combined images from a six-year-long Goldman Sachs commission to photograph the construction of the company’s new Lower Manhattan headquarters—during which came the 2008 crash—with other works that seemed to offer editorial, perhaps even critical, context.

In the entrance hall, one encountered *Exteriors 7* (2009), a moody, distant shot of the new headquarters under construction, towering over nearer buildings that visually frame it. There’s a witty detail set against gray sky—the tail end of a Geico advertising banner, the visible words: “The money.” Two more unflattering construction shots, *4th Floor #4* (2008) and *Sand Pit 3* (2007-08), flirt with abstraction, the former showing the actual floor of the level on which trading takes place, the latter a seemingly bubbling pool of water in the sandpit, its near-abstraction marred by a floating plastic shopping bag.

Nearby was *Groundbreaking* (Hank and Hillary), 2005, a close-cropped, candid shot showing Henry Paulson—then Goldman’s CEO and one year later U.S. Treasury Secretary—in a conspiratorial-looking huddle with then-Senator Clinton. Far from the classic smiles-and-shovels press image, *Groundbreaking* is more akin to something from the files of a private detective.

To get in and out of the gallery’s main room, one had to skirt *7th Floor 2* (2011), an 8-by-12-foot set of modular pine shelves. Described by a gallery staffer as a “liminal” object, neither sculpture nor shelf, to me it seemed simply both, and no more interesting for that.

More intriguing were the photos not from the Goldman Sachs commission. *Untitled* (*Point Break*), 2010, depicts an altered poster for the 1991 movie, starring Keanu Reeves and Patrick Swayze. Swayze plays one of a gang of surfers-cum-bank robbers who wear rubber masks of former U.S. presidents during their crimes—a fitting symbol for those in power robbing the system, and one in which, comically, Ethridge inserts his own face in place of Swayze’s, as if implicating himself. Two Tokyo cityscapes photographed through windows are marked by glare on the window glass, again implicating the photographer, just as Ethridge’s patrons and their ilk were implicated in the crash of 2008.

Some photographs, including Rigid (2007–08), seem more like non sequiturs. Rigid is a collage of found images, namely the dozen buxom, bikini-clad women featured in a Ridgid tool company calendar. Furthering Ethridge’s study of glamour and celebrity, which he often undermines, was a large collaged double portrait of actress Leelee Sobieski. The two shots, according to gallery staff, are slightly different. And by slightly, I mean imperceptibly. For me, the combination suggested a metaphor for the subtly different appearances the Goldman photographs took on over subsequent viewings.



Roe Ethridge: Untitled (Point Break), 2010,
C-print, 363/4 by 251/4 inches; at Andrew Kreps