

## ART REVIEW

### Ignoring Boundaries and Borrowing Freely

By KAREN ROSENBERG

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Back in 1985, when the Museum of Modern Art inaugurated its New Photography series, appropriation was very much in vogue. Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine and other “re-photographers” delighted and outraged viewers with their canny absorptions of other artists’ work. So it’s fitting that “New Photography 2010,” which marks the 25th anniversary of the series, is all about “post-appropriative practice.”



“New Photography 2010”: Roe Ethridge’s “Old Fruit” (2010), part of this show at the Museum of Modern Art, is a raffish take on pictorialism. Andrew Kreps Gallery

That’s curator-speak for moving among art photography, film and editorial work (i.e., magazines). The original appropriators did this too, but with a sense of transgression and a lot more Baudrillard.

The four artists in this year’s stimulating show — Roe Ethridge, Elad Lassry, Alex Prager and Amanda Ross-Ho — care about visual literacy, not theory. They revel in color, and in the physical presence of the photographic print. And they’re openly nostalgic, while their predecessors were critical.

“New Photography 2010” was organized by Roxana Marcoci, a curator in MoMA’s photography department. Ms. Marcoci, who also put together the museum’s current sixth-floor exhibition “The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today,” has a keen eye for how photography interacts with other mediums. Her installation combines photography, 16-millimeter film and sculpture, often seamlessly. It also sparks conversations among the separate bodies of work, which hasn’t always been the case with the New Photography series.

Photographs by Mr. Ethridge and Mr. Lassry, for instance, installed on opposite walls, have a lively back and forth. Mr. Ethridge, the eldest of the group at 41, is an active commercial photographer who often appropriates his own work — as well as newspaper, catalog and stock photography — for his museum and gallery shows. Because he has the eye of a sophisticated editor, it all comes together beautifully.

His prints at MoMA vary widely in scale and source material. One large, graphic piece uses the checkered pattern on a designer scarf as a foil for a white plate grabbed from the Web site of Bed Bath & Beyond. Another, an outtake from a fashion assignment, shows a rosy-cheeked, wavy-haired model in a poufy white shirt and looks vaguely baroque.

Two pictures of a young Juilliard dancer at the barre invoke yet another format, the photo essay. But Mr. Ethridge’s most evocative works are still lifes with a twist, rooted in catalog illustrations and painterly trompe l’oeil. His shot of a bowl of moldy fruit, which appeared on the cover of Vice magazine, is a standout — a raffish take on pictorialism.

Mr. Lassry’s intensely vivid photographs are also related to the magazine page — they’re all about the size of a newsweekly — though their contents have more to do with the movie industry than with publishing. An Israeli-born transplant to Los Angeles, he studied film at CalArts before receiving his M.F.A. from the University of Southern California, and his aesthetic is best described as vintage Hollywood with a touch of John Baldessari.

He makes abundant use of monochrome backgrounds, often in blues and greens that evoke the green screens of pre-CGI special-effects technology. His short untitled film, in which the actor Eric Stoltz directs a dancer held aloft by wires, is a stylized homage to the cinematic craft of movies. Mr. Lassry also appropriates photographs from film archives, sometimes cropping them and sometimes just representing them in gilded frames.

In places he veers less deliberately into other artists’ territory, as in a shot of bottles of red nail polish on small green pedestals that recalls the minimalist-kitsch sculptures of Rachel Harrison. But he also alludes to his own life experience, as in “Untitled (Baguette, Challa, Croissant),” a ghostly image of those three kinds of bread that is printed from multiple negatives.

Even more than Mr. Lassry, the self-taught Ms. Prager mines the movies for her staged scenes of women in retro-glam attire. Lush as they are, her images could use more distance from their sources.

Three large-scale photographs from 2007-8 are too obviously beholden to the visions of Douglas Sirk, David Lynch and Alfred Hitchcock, and also, perhaps, to Cindy Sherman. A more recent image, “Crowd

#1 (Stan Douglas)," refers directly to Mr. Douglas's photograph "Hastings Park, 16 July 1955" (2008). But where Mr. Douglas takes a social interest in the gathering, and even hints at unrest beyond the frame, Ms. Prager lingers on the midcentury outfits: it's one big "Mad Men" costume party. (To be fair, it's part of a series that will appear in the November issue of W magazine.)

Shallowness also hampers Ms. Prager's four-minute film "Despair," which stars the actress Bryce Dallas Howard and is based on the classic movie "The Red Shoes." Ms. Howard's expressive, heavily made-up features can't quite compensate for the sense that you are watching one of those elaborate perfume ads made on a feature-film budget.

Ms. Prager isn't a bad choice for this show, though, because her work, like the others, is rooted in movies and magazines. And she can be terrifically profound when she's on assignment, as she was in a noirish series that accompanied "The Estrogen Dilemma," an article in The New York Times Magazine. (That series is not in the show, but a related work is.)

The oddball in the group, Amanda Ross-Ho, is really more of a sculptor and installation artist than a photographer. The works at MoMA, mostly collages and assemblages, do explore her familial relationship to the medium. (She is the daughter and niece of professional photographers.) They also relate photography to other art processes, often pairing prints with drawing tools from Ms. Ross-Ho's studio.

Best is a large assemblage on a large sheet of propped-up drywall, which incorporates illustrations from craft manuals and photography textbooks, as well as photographs by Ms. Ross-Ho's parents. (Her mother's is a black-and-white portrait; her father's is a shot of cocktail glasses on a rainbow-hued background.) As a whole it's cryptically personal, like an early Rauschenberg, but with the schematic quality of conceptual/appropriation art.

Yet the attention lavished on the work's construction — its hand-drilled pegboard holes, its paint-splashed base — reduces the photographs to bit players in a sculptural narrative. This stubborn fact may make you wonder whether New Photography, 25 years on, is getting too far away from its roots.

*"New Photography 2010" runs through Jan. 10 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, [moma.org](http://moma.org).*