

Garry Winogrand: Color

Brooklyn Museum

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By Jennifer Vignone for <http://www.NY-ARTNews.com>

The Exhibition

With New York City-like impatience, images from “Garry Winogrand: Color” at the Brooklyn Museum snap by, grasping, demanding — bodies entwine on a beach — a stylish young couple walks with a chimpanzee on a city street — clowns carouse in a crowd — Eartha Kitt shares a smokey stare — a woman curls over her coffee in a diner — beautiful women wander New York City streets — Fords, fire engines, Coney Island, and condiments on a food tray vie for consideration. These glittering fragments of life are reminders of life’s transience, a deliberate contrast from how the photographs have frozen those moments forever.



Garry Winogrand:Color. Installation, Brooklyn Museum.

Initially, black and white was the dominant palette for photography. For purists, it was considered the only real way to photograph. But photographers experimented with color as early as the 1840s, with successful permanent color processing achieved in 1861. At first, color was used as a means of communicating information and selling products — fashion, sports, and news photos. For Gary

Winogrand, color was too intriguing for such limited use, and he devoted almost twenty years to exploring it.



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Kodachrome was the choice of film but developing and printing was beyond his financial means. So, Winogrand showed his color work in carousels, projecting images onto the wall as a slideshow. The entrance to the exhibition recreates that experience with a carousel mounted on a pedestal projecting pictures onto the wall. But it is when stepping through the darkroom-like black curtains and into the main gallery where the experience explodes into a flickering larger-than-life cornucopia.

The two long walls project giant images that are grouped into eight categories that provide context to Winogrand's themes and interests: Coney Island, 1952-1958; Early Color, 1950s; In the Streets, 1960s; Portraits and Still Lives, 1960s; On the Road, 1960s; Travel, 1960s; Women, 1960s; and White Masculinity, 1960s. Images cycle through these groups, giving just enough time to appreciate the need to see them several times to get even half of what is captured within each frame.

How and What We See

Photography opened the door to a new way of capturing historic events, people, places — anything that heretofore painters served as the primary record-keepers. Artists felt that they were being replaced, but quickly discovered that photography had also freed them. No longer responsible for the

typical representation of people, places, and things, they could express themselves on a more interpretive level. The awakening brought forth evolution and revolution in seeing and painting, and art moved to another plateau, inspiring people to see, think, and communicate about the world in a deeper way.

Soon, photographers wanted the same — to be more than just reporters. Their pictures became more experimental and expressive. The photographer used the camera as a brush, the image open to interpretation. Moments captured between men and women, nature, places, and events told only part of a story. The images were viewed for how they filled the space, the shapes they created. How they were developed and printed introduced the photographer's hand as an expressive part of the final print. Photography was now an art.



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In the picture of the diner interior — from the graphic print of the head wrap worn by the woman in seated at the counter in the foreground, to the decorations on the wall, the uniform on the waitress to the curvature of the counter — there is always something that engages the eye. Color adds depth through the overall cast of pinkness and how it matches the waitress' uniform, and the detail it lends to the shirts on the men in the background. The woman ruminates quietly as the waitress is occupied with the register and patrons manage their food. Every inch is accounted for, breaking into treatments of positive and negative space that keeps our interest moving within the frame. But for all that we can see, there is nothing we can truly know. The moment remains a mystery.



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The young man from “White Masculinity, 1960s” is seated on the ledge of a fountain or pool of water, perhaps outside of a business building. The use of color highlights the minimalism of the image. The man is attired in black and white with a large white bandage around the middle finger of his right hand. Colour is subtly seen in his skin, the shadow below him, and some of the surrounding backdrop of people and pool of water. His surprised or quizzical expression is emphasized by shadows and highlights bouncing off his facial features. The placement of the bandaged finger amusingly mimics the location of his manhood extending out into the foreground. But for all of these visual cues, we know nothing. We do not know what happened to his finger and when it happened. We do not know who he is, what he is doing there, where he is, what happened moments before, or what happened moments afterward. And none of that matters. The photograph is an illusion, a conceit. It is more like a drawing or a painting in the form and content create a visual experience of the moment the picture was taken. Because it is a photo of a “real” man, and not a drawn or painted

image, we think we connect to it more than we do or should. And that is part of the con, adding to the complexity.

What is Real and What is Seen

Photography compels us to examine that what appears to be “real” is not necessarily so and how that captured instant is not representative of the before or after. The quickness of the photographed image seems to say “I gotcha!” when it actually captured just a snippet. And within that snippet, the story told is not so much about the truth, but the impression created by what remains on the negative. Garry Winogrand said, “A photograph is the illusion of a literal description of how the camera 'saw' a piece of time and space.” Nothing is as it seems within the frame, and that is part of what keeps you looking. The viewer tries to see if there is some message being communicated about an historic event or a relationship amongst the characters in the picture. Only there does not have to be. As Winogrand further elucidates, “Photography is about finding out what can happen in the frame. When you put four edges around some facts, you change those facts.” This allows the image to be about the image itself, or as Winogrand put it, a “battle of form versus content”.

In the film “The Reason for Winogrand”(1), photographer and author, Leo Rubinfien, said that Winogrand took on large issues and was interested in the life of this nation. He said that images take on their own lives apart from the point of origin. Part of the allure of photography is its “rich ambiguity”, or as Winogrand would say, “There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described.”

Garry Winogrand died of cancer at the age of 56. The Brooklyn Museum’s tribute to his color work successfully showcases Winogrand’s dedication to color on a grand scale. His images pose unanswered questions, providing a glimpse at the illusion of life — its richness and nothingness — that we are all a part of. It is also a tribute to the difficulty of understanding photography and how color added to appreciating a medium that, when at its best, in Winogrand’s words, is “always on the edge of failure”. The exhibition also shows how technology has changed the world. Today we load images onto the web within moments of being taken. We record our lives as we eat, sleep, ideate, altercate, pontificate — photo editing the lines of reality and make-believe constantly. We can only imagine how Winogrand might have embraced this changing medium.

1. Pratt Photography Lecture Series, Leo Rubinfien “The Reasons for Winogrand” | September 10, 2014 -- <https://vimeo.com/136833889>