

GAGOSIAN

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Gagosian Gallery trains its lens on photography

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*Douglas Gordon transforms his face with tape in “Monster Reborn” (2002) at the Gagosian Gallery in San Francisco.
Photo: Photograph by Johnna Arnold / © Studio lost but found / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018*

Thematic exhibitions in commercial art galleries can be disappointing affairs, designed not to make an aesthetic or theoretical point, but to showcase backroom inventory. But when a gallery has a stable as deep and star-studded as Gagosian Gallery, the multinational representative of many of the biggest names in contemporary art, the possibilities are more promising.

Gagosian’s San Francisco outlet, the newest and among the smallest of 16 worldwide, isn’t sent the blockbuster shows that make news in New York and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the current exhibition, “About Photography,” is a thoughtful and thought-provoking survey of attitudes toward the medium displayed by 32 artists.

The central pole around which all else in the show revolves is a painted bronze Duane Hanson sculpture, “Man With Camera” (1991-92). Hanson’s uncannily lifelike depictions of everyday people are always fascinating in their detailed observation and masterful fakery. But their greatest power is in their looming presence. You might sense one just behind your back, or glimpse a stilled gesture from the corner of your eye. In their frozen actuality, they are the opposite of photographs, which are tales read secondhand.

The best choices in the exhibition take a similarly perverse approach to the meaning and operation of photographs. Dike Blair’s untitled oil painting (2017) of an otherwise unremarkable, frosted glass door is not the casual grab-shot it would be as a photograph, but a meditative contemplation of light, atmosphere and accident.

Douglas Gordon's "Monster Reborn" (2002), a pair of self-portraits in which the artist distorts his perfectly pleasant face using a roll of transparent tape, plays with the idea of transformation, fiction and manipulation. A different technique achieves much the same effect in an image from Cindy Sherman's famous series of self-portraits, "Untitled Film Still #60" (1980).

The most powerful work in the exhibition, though, is the most straightforward as a document. A loose-leaf binder containing 53 deadpan images with short texts comprises "Chris Burden Deluxe Photo Book 1971-73" (1974).

The artist notoriously had himself shot in the arm by a rifle-wielding friend; crawled through broken glass; spent an entire day hung on a museum gallery wall, bound into a canvas sling. The individual photographs tell us virtually nothing, just as journalistic pictures are often empty of independent meaning, but the succession of images, page-by-page, is a steady beat of abnegation and self-abuse in the name of art.