

Works of key man in 'conceptual photography'

Kenneth Baker

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Everyone interested in 20th century photography has seen the one or two pictures by Kenneth

Josephson that always make it into anthologies, and probably no more. So the Koch Gallery performs a great service in presenting a substantial show of his work.

Josephson taught for 30 years at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago after studying at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design, direct New World descendant of the Bauhaus. He studied with Minor White and was closely associated with Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Posthumously, they have each eclipsed Josephson in reputation, but even some of his early work maintains a currency that theirs lacks. So called "conceptual photography," of which Josephson counts as a founding figure, is a going thing today in the hands of artists such as Christopher Williams and Liz Deschenes.

Josephson's picture titled "Chicago" (1964) takes "street photography" quite literally. It records a traffic arrow painted on asphalt. The paint job tagged a manhole cover that sewer workers later removed and replaced, indifferent to its original orientation. So the bulk of the arrow points one way, the fragment on the manhole cover another: a figure for internal dissension that might symbolize a personality, a city or a whole society.

This sort of interrupted signifier and the luck of its discovery became anchors of Josephson's work.

Consider "Stockholm" (1967). Apparently, Josephson came upon a parked Volvo shortly after a dusting of snow had fallen. The car must have cast its shadow on the pavement when a burst of sunlight occurred. The shadow kept the snow on the pavement within it from melting, leaving a reversed silhouette - a sort of auratic mirror image - of the car, which Josephson captured.

Many of Josephson's pictures set depicted realities and the realities of depiction at odds, sometimes to comic effect. Look at "L.A." (1982). Here the photographer held his camera in one hand, while in the other he held what looks like a small photographic print mounted on a white card. It apparently masks, and its image replaces, a portion of the subject - an empty city crosswalk.

The internal image describes a painted crosswalk boundary gone all wavy from the softening of the

asphalt in summer heat. The portions of the crosswalk not masked appear perfectly straight, so a hasty viewer will assume that that Josephson has remade the reality before the camera by interposing an image.

The crucial, unriddling detail lies at the lower left corner of the frame: the shadow cast by the white card Josephson holds - it has a square cut out of its center. The white card, rather than merely masking the camera's view, serves as a kind of internal viewfinder. "L.A." turns out to be a little wordless essay on the nature of photographic information.

But Josephson set aside his trickiness in many pictures here, both early and late, such as the remarkable "Illinois" (1958), in which the dark shapes of broken factory windows echo those of pigeons caught in flight above them.

"Sawdust mountain" at bransten

Photographer Eirik Johnson, formerly of Oakland, presents pictures from a recent series called "Sawdust Mountain" at the Rena Bransten Gallery.

They describe the evidence of clashing agendas - of community, industry, conservationists - in an area of the Northwest that once thrived on unbridled logging and paper production.

Johnson works in a documentary spirit, but his choices of subject continually hint that the realities at issue defeat the capacities of a merely visual record.

The "Junked blue trucks, Forks, Washington" (2007), up on blocks, their wheels removed, seem to levitate, evoking a kind of suspended animation in the realms of work and domestic economy.

Johnson's "Alley mural, Aberdeen, Washington" (2006) edges toward Josephson territory in recording a time-worn mural of ambiguous meaning painted in an alley billboard space. The mural, a bear-hunting scene in half-felled forest, feels bereft of whatever context once gave it its intended meaning. Like most of Smith's pictures here, it evokes the sense of a place lost in time.

Kenneth Josephson: Photographs. Through next Sat. Robert Koch Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 421-0122, www.kochgallery.com.

Eirik Johnson: Sawdust Mountain: Photographs. Through next Sat. Rena Bransten Gallery, 77 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 982-3292, www.renabranstengallery.com.

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