

Art in America

Photo Play The Social Life of the Pictures Generation

by Linda Yablonsky
April 3, 2009

David Salle recently relayed to me a joke that began with this question: Why did the Conceptual artist start painting? Answer: Because he heard it was a good idea. "One of us made that up 30 years ago," Salle said. "It was really funny then."

By "us," Salle meant one of the artists in "The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984," an exhibition opening this month at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A historical survey organized by the Met's associate photography curator Douglas Eklund, the show re-examines the early work of 30 artists whom he identifies as members of the last definitive movement in 20th-century art. Named for Douglas Crimp's 1977 "Pictures" exhibition at New York's Artists Space, the group came of age by questioning the entire apparatus by which images from mass media determined, rather than merely described, our experience of the world. Where once artists made visual objects, this group made "meaning."

"That was an important time," says Helene Winer, the director of Artists Space from 1975 through 1980 (the year she and Janelle Reiring founded Metro Pictures gallery in New York). "It was one of the rare occasions when artists could make a distinctive break from prior work and identify it as something new. And I was in a position to show it."

Eklund locates the birth of the Pictures generation in Los Angeles, in the early 1970s, with the "post-studio" classes that John Baldessari taught at the then-new California Institute of the Arts.

In the program, he liberated students from single-medium formalism and encouraged work with found photographs. He also emphasized a sense of social responsibility. For the Met show, Eklund proposes a cause-and-effect narrative that moves from CalArts to Manhattan, where young artists such as Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince and Sarah Charlesworth were independently seeking a path beyond Conceptualism and Pop. Others, including Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, Nancy Dwyer, Charles Clough and Michael Zwack, arrived from Buffalo, N.Y., where, as students, they had founded the multidisciplinary art space Hallwalls. But even before they moved to New York City, the Buffalo contingent started knocking on the door at Artists Space, which Longo has said was the place every young artist wanted to show.

If any one person can be said to have shaped the Pictures generation, it would be Winer. Eklund told me that his show is in some ways a tribute to her. She was the one who facilitated alliances among many of the artists. It was she who asked Crimp to organize his now-legendary exhibition, which included Longo, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Phillip Smith and Troy Brauntuch, and which few people saw. Much greater attention was paid to an essay on the subject that Crimp wrote for October two years later, dropping Smith and adding Sherman, who was not included in the exhibition because Artists Space had mounted a solo show of her work the previous year.

New attitudes toward quotation and critique were in the air at the time. But the Pictures group did not coalesce around shared interest in the mechanisms of representation alone. The social networks that formed among them fostered an atmosphere in which they could flourish, providing a ready audience to support and discuss the work. An especially unusual aspect of the group was that women enjoyed an unprecedented degree of prominence in it.

Among Pictures artists from CalArts were Salle, Goldstein, James Welling, Matt Mullican and Barbara Bloom, whose 1972 "advertisements" of steel windows for modernist homes, *Crittall Metal Windows* (1972), are the earliest works in the Met show. Painters Ross Bleckner and Eric Fischl were also at the school, and Nancy Chunn worked in

the admissions office. Her boyfriend at the time, Paul McMahon, later to work closely with Winer at Artists Space, attended Pomona College. Before Winer came to New York in 1975, she was the college's gallery director and presented exhibitions of artists such as William Leavitt, Bas Jan Ader and Alan Ruppertsberg. (None of these are represented in Eklund's show, nor are any of the Pictures artists' European contemporaries, such as Martin Kippenberger, Rosemarie Trockel or Isa Genzken.)

Further examining the social interconnectedness of the group we find that Winer's then-boyfriend, Allan McCollum, a California-born artist who was friendly with Mullican, Welling and Salle, first showed his work in Los Angeles with Claire Copley. She was Ruppertsberg's girlfriend and also showed Goldstein, Salle and Leavitt. It was Copley who introduced McCollum to Louise Lawler, with whom he would later collaborate, and who in turn introduced him to Levine. The group bonded at parties in New York given by McMahon and Chunn. Sometimes day jobs connected the artists. Lawler was a slide labeler at Leo Castelli when Reiring worked there as a registrar.

Mullican arrived in New York in 1973, when the artist-run alternative space movement was under way, with 112 Greene Street (later White Columns), Artists Space, P.S.1, the Kitchen and Franklin Furnace eventually attracting a broad range of artists, experimental filmmakers, dancers and musicians. Of course, in the mid-1970s, they needed each other. The country was in a deep recession, and there was no market for their art. Having gone bankrupt, New York itself was as marginalized as they were, particularly after the Daily News claimed that then-president Gerald Ford told the city it could "drop dead" if it expected any help from the White House. Even the critics who first took the new media-based work seriously—Crimp, Craig Owens, Brian Wallis, Edit DeAk, Walter Robinson, Liza Bear, Thomas Lawson and others—were all friends and neighbors who saw the artists and each other nearly every day. Or night. They were all roughly the same age and hung out in the same bars, went to the same parties and (for those who made art) showed in the same artist-run spaces or clubs, played in each other's rock bands and appeared in each other's movies.

To his credit, Eklund adventurously includes little-known works in various mediums by artists in the movement, such as the late '70s films of Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum and Mika-TV (Carole Ann Klonarides and Michael Owen). Early performances by Eric Bogosian are represented by videos, and a wide range of early photos by Welling, James Casebere and Brauntuch are included as well.

After 1977, the downtown New York art world occupied three territories: the East Village, Tribeca and SoHo. The East Village was favored by slightly younger artists like Kiki Smith, Tom Otterness, Diego Cortez and Charlie Ahearn, who formed Colab (for Collaborative Projects) in 1978. This group was partly responsible for the New Cinema, a storefront on St. Marks Place, where artists such as James Nares, Jim Jarmusch, Becky Johnston and Vincent Gallo screened their Super-8 films. Colab was responsible for mounting the 1980 Times Square Show. In this one-month event, 100 artists, including a number of emerging graffiti artists, showed their works in a former massage parlor scheduled for demolition.

By chance, I was afforded a ringside seat on this burgeoning scene when I went to work as a cook for Mickey Ruskin, founder of Max's Kansas City in the 1960s, the favorite watering hole of both the denizens of Warhol's Factory and the generation of Minimalists and older artists that included John Chamberlain, Carl Andre, Richard Serra and Brice Marden. They and the new artists were the steady clientele at the Locale in Greenwich Village, the Lower Manhattan Ocean Club on Chambers Street and the storied restaurant on Washington Square known simply by its address, One University Place. All of these places hosted wildly eclectic art shows by their patrons and presented artist-bands like Talking Heads, Alan Suicide and the Patti Smith Group. When the Mudd Club opened, in 1978, in a Tribeca building owned by Bleckner, everyone who didn't already know everyone else met there. "For me those friendships were empowering," says Barbara Kruger, who skipped graduate school to work as an art director at Condé Nast, matching pictures to words. The Met show features a number of early Kruger pieces with cutting texts, such as *I Can't Look at You and Breathe at the Same Time* (1981-84). "I didn't have a group I came out of school with," she explains, "I met Cindy before I saw her work. I met David Salle before his first show. We got to know what each other was doing, and there was this perfect storm of people who grew up with images from movies and TV, and didn't think of painting as the only thing that could be called art. And many of us were women."

This was indeed a pivotal moment for art. “Pictures Generation” features women who entered the art world at levels equal in importance to their male counterparts for the first time. Often, they surpassed men in terms of invention and impact. Most of the women—Kruger, Levine, Lawler, Sherman, Charlesworth, Bloom and Laurie Simmons—worked with photographic imagery, partly because photography was still regarded as a bastard child of art. This was a field they could have pretty much to themselves, while gaining the support, rather than the envy, of the bad-boy painters around them.

“I turned to photography because I thought it was the dominant language of our culture,” says Charlesworth, who is represented in the show by photographs from her first two series of newspaper appropriation works, “Modern History” (1978) and “Stills” (1977). “I remember seeing Richard Prince’s first show at Anina Nosei and thinking, ‘Oh! This guy is interested in the same stuff I am,’” Charlesworth recalls. “Photography suited the things we wanted to address.”

Prince, the token male in the New York group, was taking a critical approach to appropriated photographs, most famously of the romantic Marlboro Man cowboy. But no man in the 1970s could have made Sherman’s “Untitled Film Stills” (1977-80). Nearly a dozen works from the series are in the Met show. Here, Sherman presents female movie stereotypes with a caustic humor that mocks the way men fantasized about women, while giving women who internalize those stereotypes a sharp poke in the ribs.

Bloom remembers seeing Levine’s appropriated Walker Evans photos and thinking, “Oh my God, that is so radical and so insane. It was also brilliant. Sherrie didn’t address any of the esthetic issues, just narrowed it down to the most essential idea about what constitutes ownership of an image, and that was it.”

Joel Wachs, now president of the Andy Warhol Foundation, was a city councilman in Los Angeles in the ’80s and an avid collector of art. In 1984, he saw Levine’s “After Walker Evans” appropriations from 1981 and became the first person to buy one. “I remember having a hard time accepting it at first,” he says. “What was this art, copying someone else’s pictures? Then it started to open me up to a much broader way of thinking about art. The art itself had all the formal qualities I liked and also made people think about male dominance in the art world. Sherrie’s work was \$300 and Cindy’s was \$800, but some male painters were getting \$75,000. When Kruger said, ‘Your body is a battleground,’ that was a clarion call for a political movement.”

Kruger says, “Our stake was different from the men’s. We were all engaged in a systemic critique of the images around us, where the guys were engaged in a substitutional critique. Their careers are filled with envy. Our commentaries were about the way our bodies were contained through culture, through pictures and language.” Charlesworth adds, “I got interested not just in how women are positioned through visual language,” she says, “but how as a culture we order and organize our relationships to world events.”

These conversations became a cultural force in the decade Eklund covers in his show. The Pictures artists eventually became individual brands that, Eklund says, turned friends into rivals who competed in the marketplace, institutionalizing artists who had, up to 1980, expressed only distaste for institutions. “It’s no accident they became known as the Pictures generation, rather than the Blank generation or the Me generation,” says Eklund. Yet, adds Lawler, who never even used to sign her work, “You made objects to stimulate a dialogue, and if you’re not part of the dialogue, you’re not happening.”

Eklund’s show is not the first to take on this group. In 1989 both the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles mounted exhibitions featuring many of the same people, but the Metropolitan Museum gives the movement a certain institutional prestige. Eklund may insist that the artists’ immersion in common images started in school, but it was their personal associations that turned like-minded individuals into a generation whose pictures once made meaning and now make history.