Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2018

Slavery on Screen / American Women Writers Abroad:
1849-1976

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12879>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.12879

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference

Guillaume Mouleux, “Ernst Haas, la couleur visionnaire,” at Les Douches La Galerie (Paris), *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2018, Online since 23 September 2019, connection on 05 February 2023.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/12879> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.12879>

This text was automatically generated on 5 February 2023.

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"Ernst Haas, la couleur visionnaire," at Les Douches La Galerie (Paris)

Guillaume Mouleux

- 1 From September 6 to November 9, 2019, the art gallery Les Douches in Paris will be hosting "Ernst Haas, la couleur visionnaire," its second exhibition dedicated to one of the pioneers of color art photography, following the one which had already been held there in 2015. The exhibit is composed of thirty-one posthumous chromogenic prints authenticated by the artist's son, Alex Haas; all are based on color photographs taken between 1952 and 1981 in various places in the United States and Europe, including two in France – one in Caen, the other in Paris. Most of these pictures have never been displayed before, and in most cases the titles happen to be limited to the most basic pieces of information: the place (most often the city but in some cases only the country) and the year in which the picture was taken, resulting in the coexistence of two different "New York, 1952" displayed side by side. Not only does this minimal naming process contribute to anonymize the (few) human models as well as the least easily identifiable precise places, but it also seems to favor the subjective *punctum* over the informed *studium*, as the spectators are left entirely free (or, it could be said, are left on their own) to interpret each picture and focus their attention on one detail or another, with little to no guidance to be expected from the labels.
- 2 Divided into two separate rooms, both located at the second floor of a building which used to be a public shower facility, the exhibit manages to make the most of the space available – which, in the case of Les Douches, can be said to be in a very decent average for a Paris art gallery. A clever arrangement of the works creates a link between the two separate spaces, for instance when the picture of a swimming man taken in Greece in the second room echoes that of a New York female swimmer previously seen in the main room ("The Swimmer, Greece, 1972;" "New York, 1981"). In addition to the vivid and spectacular colors, Haas's use of contrasts and shadows stands out, and his masterful exploitation and diversion of the technical limitations of the photographic device when confronted with speed or artificial lights results in pictures whose deliberate blurriness eventually borders on abstraction ("Lights of New York, 1972;")

"Traffic, New York, 1963"); in the gallery, this paradoxical feeling of chaotically frozen movements contrasts all the more with the stillness of the seven small-format black and white photographs by Minnesota artist Tom Arndt, which the most curious visitors may find in an isolated corner.

- 3 But the most striking aspect in Haas's works lies in the superimposition of images. The use of rearview mirrors ("New York, 1973;" "USA, 1979;" "Western Skies Motel, New Mexico, USA, 1978") is a clever, natural and sometimes very subtle¹ manner to introduce insets, while the depiction of television screens ("New York, 1974;" "New York, 1975;" "California, 1975") even more obviously tends toward the domain of the meta-image. In other cases, direct or indirect reflections are exploited as a manner to assert the photographic medium's ability to render the very experience of viewing, with all its distortions and imperfections ("Third Avenue Reflection, New York City, USA, 1952;" "Caen, France, 1976"). The technical processes used are sometimes difficult to identify for the profane eye though, and Marilyn Monroe's crossfade-like ghostly appearance over a New York building will undoubtedly remain a doubly iconic yet unexplained dream-like vision to most viewers ("New York, 1978"). In yet other instances, the observers paradoxically appear to be invited into the picture by the very prominence in the foreground of an obstacle supposed to hinder their perception, such as a decorated shop window, or a grid separating them from a passionate kiss, playfully turning the viewer into a voyeur ("London, 1960;" "USA, c. 1970"). Such superimpositions of various distinct images within the same frame illustrate Haas's self-professed "fascination in transforming [obvious reality] into a subjective point of view²," while incidentally yet another (originally unplanned) layer is added when the images of the visitors are reflected in the framing glasses, attracting further attention to similar or comparable effects within the pictures themselves.
- 4 The use of such natural effects by Haas seems a reassuring reply to Walter Benjamin's concern that the mechanical reproduction inherent to photography could question the "*hic et nunc*" of the work of art, its unique presence in space and time: instead of depreciating or even annihilating this uniqueness, Haas's art displaces it to the creative moment when the shutter button is pressed, as the use of ephemeral reflections confers an absolute originality even to pictures of the most unchangeable cityscapes; the physical, printed image is not, then, necessarily to be seen as an intrinsic piece of art, but rather as the closest possible material testimony of a moment of living art (that of the shot selection), affirming the *operator's* central position over all further mechanical steps involved. In the age of advanced computers, graphic editor software and digital cameras, such an exhibition is also a reminder that photography is not only a conceptual art to be admired but also a craft whose mastery does not actually *require* such state-of-the-art devices based on new technologies which, at best, were in their infancy in Haas's lifetime. The photographer's choice to give a prominent place to cityscapes, architectural elements and machines is reminiscent of the Precisionist painters, although the neutrally descriptive nature of the titles strongly differs from the movement's tendency to deliver messages through ironic names; however, Haas's tendency to favor patterns and his carefully elaborate framing also both differ from the pictorial neutrality and almost documentary nature of the "new color" movement which would emerge in the 1970s, a difference which likely hindered the recognition of Haas's more symbolic and lyrical approach.³

- 5 Obviously, the exhibition does not offer a comprehensive review of Haas's career, but neither does it claim to. The selection of works is not only coherent, it also manages to cover a wide array of themes while spanning no less than three decades, in spite of what seems a slight overrepresentation of works from the 1970s – perhaps precisely in order to contrast Haas's works with the dominant trends in photography during that period of time. However, the limits inherent to an art gallery are sometimes felt. While the press release insists on the rareness of most of the pictures on display, no detail is provided within the exhibition as to the previous circulation (or absence thereof) of each photograph. Such a silence potentially reinforces the innocence of the viewer's eye in front of the works (a process consistent with the neutral and often minimalistic titles), but also paradoxically contributes to perpetuate the gap between the learned and unlearned viewers in an apparent contradiction with the egalitarian effect induced by the sobriety of most names.⁴ Some may, of course, object that the vocation of a photography-oriented art gallery is to sell reproductions, not to take the role of a comprehensive educational institution; there is, however, a case to be made that providing more details could easily provide a sales argument, especially in the case of Haas, whose well-deserved place in the history of photography is still to be made. The rarest pictures of a renowned artist of course only need to be publicized as such to be instantly endowed with a sense of attractiveness; as for photographs which have already been used in the past (such as "Third Avenue Reflection, New York City, USA, 1952," which is mentioned in the press release as first introduced to a general audience through Haas's photographic essay "Images of a Magic City" published in *Life* in 1953⁵), they do not lose their prestige for such – precisely due to the radiation of the copies on the original, even if the notion of original should be relativized by the number of prints available:⁶ this is where iconic pictures join the cult of icons, in favor of which Saint Basil the Great argued over 1,500 years ago that the prestige of an original model "is not cloven in two, nor the glory divided" by the multiplication of reproductions, precisely "because the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype" – a principle not unlike that upon which the career of Andy Warhol, himself a Byzantine Catholic, has largely rested.
- 6 In spite of this limited shortcoming which is however bound to be somehow frustrating to the scholarly-minded viewer, the exhibition as a whole appears true to Haas's vision of color photography as a "philosophy of seeing" which is "not journalism, but a visual poetry."⁷ It also stands as a testimony to how the Austrian-born photographer, although not recognized as an inspiration by the following generation of emblematic color photographers such as William Eggleston, had decidedly paved the way for the recognition of color photography as a genuine art form.
- 7 Link to the exhibition's website: <http://www.lesdoucheslagalerie.com/en/expositions/presentation/87/la-couleur-visionnaire>

NOTES

1. In some cases, the edges of the mirror are so indistinct that the very process used has to be guessed by the viewer.
 2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-14104149>
 3. Introduction by Virginie Chardin to *Ernst Haas*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2010, unpaginated.
 4. Although it may be assumed that the most minimalistic names indicate the lack of circulation of the photograph prior to the artist's death in 1986, this offers no clue as to any possible previous posthumous circulation.
 5. Ernst Haas, "Images of a Magic City, part II." In *Life*, September 21st 1953, p. 125.
 6. Most of the photographs in the exhibition are part of limited series of either 25 or 30 authenticated copies.
 7. Press release by the MoMA for the "Ernst Haas – Color Photography" exhibition, August 4, 1962, available online at https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326283.pdf
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