

CURATOR'S CORNER

Jodi Roberts Robert M. and Ruth L. Halperin Curator for Modern and Contemporary Art

The Matter of Photography in the Americas



Photograph by Stacy H. Geiken

How did this exhibition come about?

It came out of a series of conversations with Natalia [Brizuela], my co-curator from the University of California, Berkeley. We've known one another for quite a while, and we kept returning to the topic of how Latino and Latin American photography is presented in museum exhibitions. We noted that in survey shows and texts, scholars tend to gravitate toward Latino and Latin American photographers who focus on picturing geographic and ethnographic difference—which is to say, cultural and/or physical markers that denote a particular place or people. But what this approach leaves out are a whole lot of artists who are asking different questions about the technical development of photography, its social uses, and its public circulation. *The Matter of Photography in the Americas* is not a show about documentary photographs of far-off sites and figures. It focuses on artists who explore photography from a conceptual point of view rather than as a means of recording one's immediate surroundings.



Miguel Calderón (Mexico, b. 1971), *Serie Museo de Historia Natural #3 (Museum of Natural History series #3)*, 1995. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

What are some of the questions the exhibition explores?

The questions it explores are varied, including how the social and aesthetic uses of photography have changed over the past century, as well as the materials we use to make photographs. One major issue that many of the artists in the exhibition are working through is how we've become numb to photographs because they're now everywhere in our daily lives. In the digital era, anyone can make a photograph anytime, and these images fly through the digital sphere at remarkable speeds. It's difficult to grasp the meaning of any single photograph when we are consistently awash in images.



Oscar Muñoz (Colombia, b. 1951), *Biografías (Mujer adulta) (Biographies [adult woman])*, 2002. Nine chromogenic prints made from film stills. Courtesy of the artist and Sicardi Gallery, Houston

How do the artists in this exhibition refocus our attention?

They refocus our attention by changing the way we think about and view photographs. For decades, the Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz, for example, has been interested in photography's limitations as a means of memorializing individuals and their lives, particularly when we are exposed to an overabundance of photographic images. In various types of works, Muñoz subjects his own photographs, as well as those made by others, to ingenious printing methods that undo the basic goal of photography—to permanently fix an image made of light onto a stable surface. In one work, he prints images on the surface of water in a sink using charcoal powder. When the sink is slowly drained, the images distort and eventually disappear. The viewer's attention becomes more focused, because the permanence of the image can no longer be taken for granted. Photographs have traditionally been a memory aid, but if their permanence is no longer a given, then we as viewers are forced to look at them and the people represented in them more closely and perhaps treasure them in a different way.

What are you most excited to share?

I really love the variety of ways photographs and the materials of photography are presented in this exhibition. Along with traditional types of photographs, like gelatin silver prints, it includes prints, drawings, and sound installations—a wide variety of art forms that are all used to create powerful critiques of the medium. The exhibition opens up a new—and much needed—conversation about what constitutes photography from and about Latin America.