

The New York Times

Sunday, November 14, 1971

Photography

From Fine Art To Plain Junk

By GENE THORNTON

CAN contemporary art photography find success and happiness on Madison Avenue? In what must be described as a brave, bold move, New York's newest photography gallery, Light, raised this question when it opened last week at 1018 Madison Avenue, smack in the center of Manhattan's Saturday afternoon art trekking territory. The building at 1018 Madison is well known to Saturday trekkers, who take the elevator to the top floor and then work their way back down from gallery to gallery. Except for a bookstore on the second floor, the building is solid art from roof to sidewalk, and even the bookstore specializes in art. Now that photography has moved in, will art lovers look at it too?

Light's opening exhibition, through Dec. 5, suggests a hopefully affirmative answer. It is a group show of 13 of the gallery's 14 regulars—the 14th, Benno Friedman, signed up too late for inclusion in the show. They are art photographers all. The best known are probably Wynn Bullock, Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind.

Frederick Sommer, though not so well known, is a monumental figure in art photography circles, and Robert Fichter and Todd Walker are close behind. Bea Nettles and Doug Prince work in three dimensions and were shown at the Museum of Modern Art's photography into sculpture show last year. Five others were included in "Vision and Expression," the George Eastman House show of younger photographers reviewed in this column last

year—Thomas Barrow, Michael Bishop, Emmett Gowin, Roger Mertin and Keith Smith.

The current show is much too heterogeneous to be summarized in a sentence. However, it does foreshadow a line of high seriousness and the introduction to New York of a number of younger photographers better known, up to now, in more academic environments. Harold Jones, Light's director, was formerly Director of Exhibitions at George Eastman House, and most of Light's photographers are teachers who spend their working lives far from commercial photography. It will be interesting to see how they do amidst the rank but hardy growths that flourish in Manhattan.

STEPHEN SHORE

At the opposite pole from academic art photography is the exhibition of mostly anonymous junk photographs selected by Stephen Eric Shore and on view at The 98 Greene Street Loft, from 2 to 4 P.M. daily through Saturday. I emphasize "mostly" when I say anonymous and junk because there is one large old non-junk photogravure by E. Muybridge that someone might want to keep for its own sake. Most of the pictures, however, are the kind that never get signed by the photographer and are never gathered together and offered to the public in expensive portfolios; the kind that are usually thrown away in wholesale lots and only collected for purely personal reasons.

There are postcards and

snapshots and dirty playing cards, porn of all sorts, both amateur and professional. There are publicity stills, news photos, night club souvenir photos, neighborhood studio portraits and portraits taken in subway vending machines. There is a truly magnificent collection of four-color patriotic pictures from the United States Government Printing Office, and there is an unintentionally funny photograph of our Governor pressing the flesh of a middle-aged male admirer, the admirer writhing and swooning in Rocky's masterful handclasp like Bernini's St. Theresa in ecstasy. This kind of photograph seldom turns up in museums and galleries, though it is all the "art" that most people ever need. Stephen Shore's fascinating selection is a healthy, if possibly somewhat unwelcome, reminder of the part that photography really plays in the world.

STEVE SALMIERI

The photographs of Steve Salmieri, at the Underground Gallery through Nov. 28th, fall somewhere between the extremes of art and life. Salmieri photographs ugly people who are trying to be beautiful. His pictures are posed portraits, photographed straight on in Diane Arbus fashion, yet they are really not at all like Arbus's. For one thing, Salmieri shows more of his sitters' environment than she usually did. For another, his people are not freaks and monsters. There is nothing wrong with them that is not wrong with every one of us: crooked teeth, bad skin, too much fat, a general failure to be as beautiful as the actresses who demonstrate hair spray on TV.

Most of Salmieri's subjects seem to live in city apartments or split-level houses in Queens furnished in the ornate suburban baroque of Castro Convertible. They are neither rich nor poor but

they are more familiar with poverty than wealth. They sit looking nice and genteel on sateen sofas with plastic slip covers beneath mirrors with mirrored frames, or in neatly kept bedrooms decorated with a crucifix, a TV set and a collection of Coney Island animals. At the beach they bulge out of their bathing suits, they dress up with no place to go, they are suddenly bewildered when the commonplace necessities of life shoot down their TV-inspired aspirations to glamour.

Some of the pictures of children are humorous—the solemn little fat boy in his pompous band uniform, the wicked little ragamuffin smoking in the street—but the general mood is a kind of bittersweet. Even Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Bernstein, the one pair of certified beautiful people in this collection, look lost and forlorn in their decorated living room, as if they too had tried and failed to resemble the gods and heroes of the movie and TV screen.

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Several readers have wondered why this column has not reviewed the exhibition, "Photographs of Women," at the Museum of Modern Art through Nov. 30. This small show of 43 pictures, located in the Museum's third floor photography galleries, is mainly drawn from the Museum's own collection. Only 13 of the 33 photographers are women. Although all the photographs show women, no particular attitude toward women is suggested by the selection and grouping. In short, the show is virtually indistinguishable from the changing exhibitions of pictures from the Museum's collection that often occupy this gallery space. A less tasteful, more vulgar selection, with Playboy bunnies and pornographic playing cards in among the Avedons, Steichens and Langes, might have been more to the point.