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Art Reviews

## Photos From a Very Unpleasant Decade

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From the Vietnam War, the Kent State student shootings and the Watergate scandal to Pacer station wagons and bell bottom pants, the 1970s were easily one of the ugliest decades in postwar American history. At Dan Bernier Gallery, Anthony Hernandez's quietly devastating black-and-white photographs capture the sense of shattered idealism and mounting cynicism that accompanied this period, a time when we, as individuals and as a nation, seemed to have collectively lost our way.

During this period, Hernandez traveled in Los Angeles, Washington, Hawaii, London and Saigon, where he photographed strangers as they walked past him through the bustling city streets. Most of his subjects appear ill at ease before Hernandez's intrusive lens. Some keep their eyes downcast as they rush by, while others stare back at him with suspicion or outright hostility. Almost no one smiles. Several people actually shield their faces from the photographer with their hands, or, in the case of one elderly man, a piece of paper.

At first, you regard these vintage prints with detached irony and even amusement--Hernandez provides ample evidence that the '70s were a low point in 20th century fashion. Women fare the worst: harsh black eyeliner, white lipstick, shapeless patterned shifts and hideous bouffant hairdos seem to have been the ensemble du jour.

The longer you look at these deceptively casual street portraits, however, the more truly horrifying they become. Many linger in your mind like painful memories: a sad-sack teenage girl shuffling down the street and wearing the grimace of a much-older woman; a male transient from Washington, D.C., slumping wearily against a park bench while, halfway around the world, a Vietnamese woman, her legs stunted and deformed, assumes a nearly identical pose on a similar bench.

A photograph of a naked dancer in a sordid Hollywood girlie show, her features a grotesquely distorted mask of exhaustion, her bony frame visible beneath jiggling folds of pallid flesh, is nothing if not brutal. She has been utterly stripped of humanity--by the men who watch her, by Hernandez's camera and, consequently, by us.

Much of the tension generated by Hernandez's deeply disturbing images derives from the razor-thin line he walks between photographing human degradation and exploiting it himself. Thankfully, his risky ventures almost always pay off. Although Hernandez's work is uncompromising and at times even remorseless, he is far more successful than most at conveying the rank despair that chills the lives of his anonymous subjects.

\* Dan Bernier Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 936-1021, through Oct. 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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Showroom: At the Patrick Painter gallery, the streamlined beauty and exacting craftsmanship of Jorge Pardo's sculptural bedroom sets should finally lay to rest all of those tired claims that a work of art can't also do double duty as a functional object.

Against each of the gallery's four walls, Pardo has sandwiched a standard-sized bed among a mirrored dressing table, two night stands, a bureau and, in one case, a huge wardrobe cabinet, all of which have been designed and fabricated by the artist himself. These eminently practical works of art recall the designs of celebrated modern architects like Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra.

You immediately notice the exacting sense of symmetry that informs every aspect of Pardo's installation, down to his incorporation of four identical paintings (by L.A. artist Laura Owens) to accent each bedroom. Pardo's use of complementary colors on the exterior panels of bed baseboards and desk drawers emphasizes the uniqueness of each bedroom set, despite its overall structural similarity to the others. (He favors cheerful, melt-in-your-mouth colors like salmon, chocolate, vanilla, lemon sorbet and ice blue).

Pardo's provocative sculptures are designed to take part in the everyday world; rarely, if ever, do they stand apart from it. Although his sturdy, well-proportioned furniture is meant to be exhibited in a gallery or museum, the rows of handy drawers built into each bed, desk and end table remind you that these are also utilitarian objects. By transforming the gallery space into something akin to a furniture store showroom, Pardo shows us that an object's meaning is never static, but changes according to the context in which we view it.

\* Patrick Painter Inc., Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 264-5988, through Oct. 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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In the Gap: In his latest solo show at Regen Projects, Raymond Pettibon revisits some of his (and American culture's) favorite subjects: sex, crime, religion and baseball, with a little surfing and rock 'n' roll thrown in to keep things youthful. Encompassing a range of artists' books, a large wall painting and a number of crudely rendered drawings with enigmatic captions thumb-tacked directly to the wall, Pettibon's new work is energized by age-old contrasts: between words and images, light and dark, horror and humor, tenderness and brutality, abject nihilism and inexplicable moments of grace.

Such hyperbolic language may seem a bit much to describe drawings that, on the surface, look a lot like comic book panels. Yet, so consumed is Pettibon with

questions of illumination, spiritual and otherwise, and so successful is he at revealing the metaphorical cracks in the firmament, the gaps between what we can see and what we can understand, it's virtually impossible to view his work in anything but expansive terms.

Pettibon's work engages us in a detective-like search for meaning that, more often than not, refuses to come clean. One image depicts two shadowy men, one wearing a '40s-style fedora, pore over a Bible as if it was a piece of evidence, as one of the men wonders, "Is there anything in it for me?" Across the room, a drawing depicts Christ walking on water--by way of a surfboard.

Another, unexpectedly poignant work depicts a large sailboat tossed violently about by a stormy blue sea. The accompanying caption tells us that "we have always found, and must always look to find . . . our way round," suggesting that there's still hope for this beleaguered ship, even in the midst of boundless chaos.

\* Regen Projects, 629 N. Almont Drive, Los Angeles, (310) 276-5424, through Oct. 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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Finisher: In each successive body of work, Mary Corse has honed a single idea with remarkable persistence. Since the early 1960s, the Southern California-based Corse has studied the effect of light on the surface of her black and white canvases by painting rigorously observed geometric compositions in gridded, banded or arched patterns. Certain portions are then coated with reflective glass "microspheres" that add a luminous glow, creating shimmering surface patterns that appear and disappear as you pass before the canvas.

One might assume that by adding color to canvases that were previously restricted to either black or white, Corse is (as her show's title claims) moving in "a new direction." This may be true, but Corse is really just following the same course she plotted for herself from the beginning. What her extremely satisfying new paintings at Chac Mool Gallery demonstrate is that this steady vision need not result in creative stagnation.

Each of Corse's new paintings is composed of two stacked, rectangular arches that wrap around an innermost rectangular core of red, blue or yellow. This inner band is the only section of the canvas that is painted with the glimmering microspheres.

As you circle around these paintings, the quality and intensity of the colored bands changes according to the angle and direction of light hitting the surface. Individual brush strokes are revealed when the painting is viewed from one side, but as you pass directly in front of it, the inner band assumes its greatest intensity, appearing as a solid block of color that seems to float ever so slightly off the surface of the canvas.

Soon, you notice that your own movement has traced an arc around each painting, marking out a circular trajectory that complements the rectangular geometry of the painting's inner arches. Although Corse relies on a familiar set of questions, she asks you to step in and, in effect, complete her paintings for her, thereby determining your own set of answers.

\* Chac Mool Gallery, 8920 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, (310) 550-6792, through Oct. 31. Closed Sundays and Mondays.