

Art Reviews

Sharon Lockhart, Laura Owens and Frances Stark at Blum & Poe

Sharon Lockhart, Laura Owens and Frances Stark's show of, respectively, one photograph, one painting and one work on paper came out of the friendship and close working relationship among the three. Instead of having an overreaching or suffocating theme, as your basic summer group show might, the disparate media and practices of these youngish artists were put together because they emerged from a close-knit community.

They chose to make works 4 feet square, a size and format none of them had used before, so that there would be a formal common thread, a fair and equal starting ground. From this physical constraint, the works diverge in stellarly opposite paths. Lockhart's photograph is a dowdy and down-home version of a Budweiser ad. Instead of three luscious babes in logo maillots, three sickly and sad-looking women stand trapped within sack cloths, which, when bunched up next to one another, form the California flag. Their dirty, baggy gray socks poke out from beneath the sacks. Owen's painting depicts a brilliant orange bromeliad on a bright-white glossy surface. As in most of her paintings, it is the strange details that captivate, such as a razor-sharp blue line cutting through the space of the canvas. Stark's delicate drawing looks from afar to be a hazy series of red and blue stripes, but up close it reveals itself to be endless vertical lines of text, which read, "the foreshortening of the mind's perspective."

What better way, I thought, to get to the bottom of this funky idea for a show than to sit down for a morning coffee klatch with the perpetrators, women I'd known for years? (Writing about friends is always a strange, politically dicey phenomenon; plus, you're apt to use the wrong quote and pay dearly later.) Anyhow, in the spirit of the show, based as it is on these barely graspable notions of friend-

ship and community, three of us—Sharon had left for Italy to premiere her new film—sat down and chatted about the idea for doing the show, and about the specific problems or challenges each ran into.

"I've just started reading Robert Smithson's essays," said Frances. "He makes it sound like in the '70s everyone was so smart, and they totally paid attention to each other, constantly writing and talking about art. He's such a great writer, so direct and unpretentious. I wonder if it's possible to have that sort of simple, straightforward interaction today—a sense of community through understanding or honesty."

Laura added, "The three of us had been having solo shows and giving each other studio visits and helping each other decide how the work in each of the shows would be hung. Actual direct advice. We'd talk it all out."

"Tim Blum and Jeff Poe noticed that," said Frances. "They saw it happening and thought, 'Oh, that's funny,' [since] our work looks so totally different. When we decided to actually do a show with a painting, a work on paper and a photograph, it clearly became an opportunity to be able to look at the work for what it is and to try to figure out exactly what's happening between our separate practices. I know Laura and I have been talking a lot since we put it up—about context..."

... how to hang shows ...
... what other shows are up right now. We're having major discussions all the time, and I think it's because we set this up for ourselves."

The three are also producing an edition together. Laura: "It's in a square box, and we're going to make it during the duration of the show. It'll have things inside that inspire us. We'll make a tape of a conversation, a mix tape, Xeroxes, drawings. It will be, in the classical sense of the word, a 'hodgepodge.'"

SHARON LOCKHART
LAURA OWENS and
FRANCES STARK

At BLUM & POE
Broadway Gallery
Complex
2642 Broadway,
Santa Monica
Through July 12

The mixture of the three distinctly different media caused problems for Frances, whose drawing hangs from delicate linen tabs that adhere to the wall. "Of course, you know that 4 feet of drawing and 4 feet of photograph and 4 feet of painting are not going to look like equal surfaces. My piece isn't framed and the painting is on stretchers and the photograph is archivaly framed. Part of the decision for me has to do with the modesty of the paper on the wall, its simplicity. The vulnerability of the piece is really important."

Whether or not the show comes together as a cohesive statement is immaterial to the artists, who feel that implicit connections between artworks that come from a shared sense of community are ultimately more important than thematic

associations. "I would hope that curators might look at it and think, 'Okay, I'm going to have a show that totally falls apart, and that might be better than a show that's all about vanity or some other umbrella idea,'" suggested Laura.

"I think the most anyone might get out of it might be, 'Hey, photo, drawing, painting, wow, they're all so different, but they're all friends and they all influence each other. Weird, huh?'" said Laura. "And that will be a total revelation for some people."

As the conversation dwindled to a close, Frances brought up another issue that's been plaguing her: "There's a three-legged cat following me around, and I think it has something to do with the show."

—Lisa Anne Auerbach



Laura Owens, *Bromeliad* (1997)

John Engstead at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



John Engstead, *Ava Gardner* (1951)

Gaze into the unfathomable depths of Natalie Wood's eyes, and sink into her porcelain skin. She is a modern Nefertiti, a timeless icon of beauty. Trace the delicately lit line of Marlon Brando's kissable lips emerging from the dark shadows of his face, at once menacing and alluring. Photography cannot help but evoke nostalgia, and this is nowhere (except possibly the family photo album) more apparent than in the cinema-celebrity photograph. John Engstead, a portrait photographer in a league with Karsh, Horst and Hurrell, captured the glamour and mystique of Hollywood in a series of celebrity portraits, made from the '40s to the '70s. In Engstead's hands, a sultry Veronica Lake and a winsome teenage Elizabeth Taylor are just two of the many sitters whose portraits possess a beguiling grace—a grace that obscures the labor required to make beautiful pictures of beautiful people.

This difficulty becomes apparent upon perusing a series of correspondence between the artist and Marlene Dietrich, which reveals the startling extent of the collaboration between artist and model—or rather, client and contractor. Beginning with a proof print, Engstead mailed a portrait, done on a film set, of Miss Dietrich smoking a cigarette in costume. She thought her hairstyle was dated, thought her dark roots were showing and wanted the cigarette removed. Engstead put his retoucher (pictured at work) on the job and mailed another proof to Dietrich, along with further lightening and darkening options. The eventual glamour portrait obviously bears little resemblance to the candid shot that spawned it, having been transformed into a signature Engstead.

The lobby gallery contains about 30 vintage prints. In the fourth-floor gallery, by contrast, are 64 poster-size prints, recently produced from Engstead's original negatives and enlarged to a proportion relatively rare in Engstead's time. These larger-than-life photographs, though amazing for the proliferation of detail, lack the beauty of the vintage prints, which, at 11 by 14 inches, were already quite large for their time. Engstead's image of Audrey Hepburn, for example, was probably never meant to be viewed so large: The incredible detail of the negative allows us now to closely inspect the minutest of details, the obvious painting of Hepburn's eyebrows to three times their natural size and the expansion of her lips well past their natural boundaries. The suspension of disbelief, the surrender to artifice, that is essential to classic Hollywood glamour is disrupted here. If nothing else, these large prints reflect our own era's preoccupation with size.

—Daniel Marlos

JOHN ENGSTEAD:
Photographer

At the
ACADEMY OF
MOTION PICTURE
ARTS AND
SCIENCES

9545 Wilshire Blvd.,
Beverly Hills
Through June 29