

LOS ANGELES

“Objects of Desire: Photography and the Language of Advertising”

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

Much of the brief history of photography has maintained a plaintive fixation on the medium’s cultural status in the interest of recognizing it as an art form rather than as a mere mechanical procedure. The medium has long been haunted by an anxiety surrounding its credentials and admittance to highbrow marketplaces, both economic and cultural. Yet this worry has produced a misunderstanding of photography’s profound influence in many aspects of mass media and daily life.

Art and commerce represent the binary of works made for self-expression and those created for mercantile purposes. Although the boundaries between these ideological realms are often blurred, the need to separate them still permeates institutional thinking about photographs. Buried in this morass are divisions of class via economic and educational privilege. Commercial photography is perceived as a servile vocational endeavor—its creators part of the workforce—while artists maintain loftier sensibilities and aspirations regarding their photographic pursuits.

“Objects of Desire: Photography and the Language of Advertising” was a splendid survey of the medium’s presence in the market as well as of its visual and conceptual legacies. Yet, most significantly, the show recognized the dialogue that keeps photography’s opposing cultural functions isolated. A useful catalogue essay by the exhibition’s curator, Rebecca Morse, served as a primer outlining the medium’s seductive and cunning influence on selling and the seeding of desire—with a crucial detour into Pop art—alongside informative texts on each artist. The presentation featured work that is vivid, stylish, playful, and persuasive.

Many of the artists here, such as Roe Ethridge and Barbara Kruger, were quite familiar, while others, including Vikky Alexander, Ericka Beckman, Frank Majore, and Sandy Skoglund, were less so—thankfully, their works had been exhumed from the museum’s permanent collection for this show. The relationships between older and newer pieces underscored the medium’s engagement with advertising, which, over time, has pivoted from ideological critique to affection, from Martha Rosler’s pioneering incisions into the sexism of consumer culture—here represented by the video *Martha Rosler Reads “Vogue”: Wishing, Dreaming, Winning, Spending*, 1982—to DIS’s cheerful endorsement of the democracy of the stock photo, as we saw in *DISimages, The New Wholesome (tags: Flip Flops, Dishwasher, Gap, Smell)*, 2013, a generic-looking studio depiction of a young woman sniffing rubber sandals while loading them into the titular appliance: a scene of aspirational normcore.

The exhibition provoked questions regarding the admittance of pop through the portals of high culture: the museum as guardian of critical imprimatur. The single advertising image included in the show was Paul Outerbridge’s *Christmas Gifts*, 1936, which was originally commissioned for the periodical *House Beautiful*. Although not as well known as his resplendent and beloved *Toilet Paper Advertisement* print from 1938—made for the Scott Paper Company’s “Petal Soft” campaign and featuring a woman’s hand gently caressing a length of the manufacturer’s product amid a scattering of red roses—there is, as in much of the artist’s work, an element of self-parody: perhaps a qualification for “art” inclusion. One may conclude that it is only the *translation* from mass media that qualifies for a parking spot on institutional walls.

A recognition and analysis of the occasional (and successful) transit from commerce to art would have enriched the tidiness of this binary equation. A key figure to reckon with is Collier Schorr—regrettably absent here—who, like Ethridge, redistributes commercial work with

exhibition installations and collage, this looping reciprocity destabilizing hierarchy and hegemony. This strategy comes at a time when images arrive without clear habitat, authorship, scale, or physical support, drifting unmoored through virtual space, sliding from the palm. Now pictures stream without context or explanation while unremarkable citizens become brands. Everything’s advertising.

Perhaps the work inspired by the anonymous stock photograph and its ghastly twin, the “lifestyle” image—represented here by works from Lucas Blalock, Elad Lassry, Mike Mandel, and Larry Sultan, among others—makes the commercial photo gleefully subversive in a museum context. This generic picture, shorn of glamour and aesthetic pretense, is not an object of desire per se, but one of modest information. Lassry’s photo *Persian Cucumbers, Shuk Hakarmel*, 2007, an acrobatic arrangement of the namesake vegetables from a Tel Aviv market, completes the transition of an “object of desire” from the thing depicted to the depiction itself—the picture as object and commodity.

—Stephen Frailey