

Galleries: Penn brings its photo collection out into the light

For years, even as it grew in size, the University of



Garry Winograd's 1978 image of a Beverly Hills shopper. (Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Art Collection)

By Edith Newhall, For The Inquirer

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Pennsylvania's photography collection was largely unseen and inaccessible. More than 800 prints languished in portfolio cases on the uppermost shelves in storage until Lynn Marsden-Atlass, a year into her tenure as director and curator of

Penn's Arthur Ross Gallery, decided to see what those cases contained.

In the fall of 2011, she invited Gabriel Martinez, an artist and senior lecturer in photography in Penn's Department of Fine Arts, to organize an exhibition of some of the collection's notable photographs. For eight months Martinez and collections manager Heather Gibson documented and digitized the entire archive.

At some point Martinez asked Marsden-Atlass if he could, in addition to his own show, present eight others, each curated by one of his eight colleagues in the photography program - in other words, assemble one show of nine distinct parts.

The result, "9 Perspectives on a Photography Collection," serves to reveal not only the scope of what Penn has but also the particular interests of its photographer-curators: Martinez, Michael Bryant (an Inquirer photographer), Nancy Davenport,

Jamie Diamond, Anna Neighbor, Karen Rodewald, Sarah Stolfa, Brent Wahl, and Tony Ward.

"9 Perspectives" has one of the most stylish installations I've seen at the Ross Gallery, beginning with the entrance tableau, a raw wood storage shelf lit like an artwork and partially stacked with portfolios and photography books, as though it's in the process of being reorganized. It gets the show's point across wordlessly.

There are so many surprising choices here it's hard to name just a few.

Among my favorites: Wahl's selections of Manuel Alvarez Bravo's nude female torso, *Diosa, Historia (Goddess, History)* (1979) and Ralph Gibson's bizarre *Legs Hair* (1974), neither of which shows the face of its female subject, thus removing the context of each composition and rendering it almost abstract.

Others: Elliott Erwitt's *Rio Mountains and Bather* (1963), which shows only the masked head and flippers of a diver swimming in Rio's Guanabara Bay; Stolfa's selections from Larry Clark's still-shocking "Tulsa" series, of young heroin addicts shooting up, juxtaposed with W. Eugene Smith's ominous image of a barking dog and Garry Winogrand's similarly dark images of Beverly Hills shoppers.

All nine shows make an effort to expose the lesser-known sides of their photographers, a strategy easily determined by going to www.upenn.edu/curator, and clicking on "Art Collection," "Photographs," and looking at the collection in its entirety.

Three exhibitions, in fact, are mini-retrospectives: Ward's all-Helmut Newton show pairs Newton's typically decadent images of stiletto-heeled women with his uncharacteristically innocent portraits (of David Hockney and Andy Warhol); Bryant reminds fans of Larry Fink that the photographer of Vanity Fair soirees has trained his lens on every kind of American partygoer; and Rodewald reveals Philadelphia-born Louis Faurer as the most experimental of street photographers, influenced by abstract expressionism, Beat poetry, and jazz.

Martinez's selections of photographs taken by the U.S. Naval Aviation Photographic Unit, which was led by Edward Steichen, includes a Steichen photograph and a striking image of Steichen himself. While Martinez's choices do not constitute a "Steichen" show, they evoke the real portrait of war that Steichen sought to make with his team.

Diamond's selections of group shots by Erwitt, Neal Slavin, Mary Ellen Mark, and others, are entertaining; Davenport's comparison of Gordon Matta-Clark's photographic documentation of his 1975 transformation of New York's Pier 52 with eight pairs of anonymous photographs of demolition and building on Penn's campus in the 1960s and '70s is a better idea than it is visually appealing.

Neighbor's lone selection, a portrait of a homeless man by Leon Levinstein, makes a singularly powerful statement that is enhanced by Neighbor's plainly written essay. It's frankly hard to imagine another photograph with it.

Arthur Ross Gallery, Fisher Fine Arts Library Building, University of Pennsylvania, 220 S. 34th St., 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. 215-898-2083 or www.upenn.edu/ARG. Through Jan. 27.