

ARTS DESK

FotoWeek: Faculty Choice: New Work by Recent Corcoran Photography and Photojournalism Graduates

Posted by **Kriston Capps** on Nov. 11, 2010 at 12:49 pm



Times are tough for Corcoran kids. In recent years the Corcoran College of Art + Design, the city's only art school and one of the nation's best incubators for undergraduate talent in photography, has slimmed its footprint but scaled up enrollment. The Corcoran sold the Randall School property in Southwest it never quite turned into a third campus. The college put its second campus in Georgetown up for sale. And the Corcoran has moved to sell its last extra asset: an untapped parcel on its main campus.

At the same time, the Corcoran has signaled its ambition to grossly grow enrollment. Enrollment has jumped 20 percent since 2008, when the school had 480 degree-seeking students; earlier this year Corcoran provost and dean Kirk Pillow said that he hopes to see the school size grow to 800 students.

Yet the harder the Corcoran squeezes these kids, the better they produce. That would seem to be the takeaway message from the Faculty Choice show. Erected for a passing moment at the Corcoran's Gallery 31, this best-of-class exhibit is a show of talent, range and beauty.

For the show, five Corcoran photography professors picked five former students. One of each teacher's works stands beside a selection of his or her pupil's photographs, along with a letter of recommendation. In one cheeky move, Claudia Smigrod collaborated with her son, Jake Dingman. The show surveys a broad range of photography, from Natalie Cheung's abstract, camera-less photographs made in the exotic Mordançage process to Hatnim Lee's relatively straightforward magazine-journalism snaps.

Of these, the highlight is the work of Andy McMillan, protégé of Corcoran photojournalism director Susan Sterner. McMillan's work is only barely photojournalism: Earnest, lush and romantic, his photographs of the former Heritage USA — the Christian theme park established by Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker — are far from objective. McMillan's subdued colors imbue the dilapidated South Carolina theme park with rich, solemn Southern Gothic charm. He has included in the series respectful portraits of residents alongside rich landscapes of suburban development tracts — a strategy straight out of the Alec Soth playbook.

What stretches, or perhaps enhances, McMillan's photojournalistic credibility is his undeniable fine art orientation. His series, shot between 2007 and 2010, includes one especially brilliant photo of a stained glass, *Untitled* (pictured above). Below the glass, assembled on an unseen table, is an array of purple and golden lamps and glass bulbs. It's an inversion of Jeff Wall's famous *After "Invisible Man"* Cibachrome, an interpretation of Ralph Ellison's novel of the same name. McMillan inverts both the physical orientation of the bulbs as well as the photo's narrative thrust. He probes the outsider narrative that evangelistic Christians sometimes use to portray themselves, a poignant comment given the context of the Bakkers' fall and the theme park's failure. But nevermind that: The real success of the photograph is an astonishing shock of red in the form of a cardinal inset in the stained glass.

If McMillan's works are the brainiest of the class, Lee's show the most gut. Her backstage photos of models during a fashion show capture the alien allure of these improbably skeletal bipeds in motion. There does not seem to be enough sinew on these thin creatures to hold their hips and rib cages together. This is of course hardly a new comment about the fashion industry. Yet Lee's photos do not seem to convey any moral note about the fashion industry so much as they illustrate a good eye for composition on the quick. (Andy Grundberg, who selected Lee for the show, adds a handsome, contemplative photograph of a beauty at rest to complement Lee's frenetic closeup of beauty behind the scenes.)

Antonio McAfee (picked by Margaret Adams) shows off all the exuberances of art school. In *Cumming (After Franz Fanon)*, a six-foot tall composite of smaller images taken in sequence, McAfee conveys a first-person perspective of a man (probably the artist) masturbating and ejaculating onto a sign that reads "KKK Rally." This and another piece involving glue and some kind of crock pot puts McAfee at the sculptural/performative end of the fine-art photography spectrum — but also at the shallow end of the pool.

Recent work by Jason Zimmerman shows him working in the same mode as when he showed, briefly, in D.C. after graduating but before leaving the city. His is a welcome homecoming. For a collaborative series, Zimmerman, or maybe Zimmerman's mother, captures a stapler gorging on a muffin, Cheez-Its skewered by paperclips and other incidents of office-place violence against snacks. These photos (*Discreet Sculptural Interventions Created on a Regular Basis by My Mother at Her Office During Lunch Breaks and Other Periods of Downtime*) are funny, easy and, unfortunately, brashly lit. More elegant but no less simple, Zimmerman's *Photos Taken From My Bed* is a series of soft and searching examinations of texture.

Such a profoundly strong show should have a longer run than a single FotoWeek, of course. Would that the Corcoran, as a school, recognized and rewarded the talent that its faculty knows perfectly well.

"Faculty Choice" is open through November 14. The opening is Thursday, November 11, from 5 to 7 p.m., at Gallery 31. Exhibition hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. otherwise. Admission is free through the Corcoran College of Art + Design entrance on New York Ave.