



Art Practical

[They Knew What They Wanted](#)

Group Show

Jul 01 - Jul 31

John Berggruen Gallery and Altman Siegel Gallery

by Christine Wong Yap

NOTE: "They Knew What They Wanted" is a group exhibition across four galleries, with four different curators. This review covers the shows at John Berggruen Gallery and Altman Siegel Gallery. Lea Feinstein's [companion review](#) covers the shows at Fraenkel Gallery and Ratio 3.

In "They Knew What They Wanted," a self-proclaimed "collaborative exhibition across four galleries," Bay Area-based Robert Bechtle curates a show mostly of pictures of people and places. For Bechtle, human activity, however mundane, unfolds in landscapes suburban and grand.

Like the curator's own photorealist paintings, Bechtle's selections at John Berggruen Gallery depict landscapes, suburban banality, the Bay Area, and people with their cars. Still, the paintings, prints, and photographs reveal individual formal and narrative concerns.

Tom McKinley's photorealist paintings are mannered *Architectural Digest*-ready images that highlight the cultural privilege awarded to modernist art, design, and architecture, even as the interiors are located in quiet but lovely natural landscapes. The works are humorous, ironic, and expertly executed. With their individualistic commitments to photorealism, McKinley and Bechtle are like aesthetic siblings.

I am still savoring Richard Misrach's trio of photographs of San Francisco Bay. Each image is shot from the same vantage point in the East Bay hills with San Francisco and Marin occupying the lower fifth of the frame. They present contrasting meteorological phenomena. The frank depiction of such immensity startles. What could be more mundane—or more protean—than the weather?

Trevor Paglen's long-distance photographs of covert sites should be anything but mundane. But the threat they embody is so indiscernible—the building complexes *could* be black-ops weapons facilities or poultry plants—that their flat representations recall the

comment-free quality of Bechtle's depictions of suburban life. Offered neither critique nor embrace, viewers are left to grapple with the significance of the imagery before them.

When I've seen Mitzi Peterson's formal, slight constructions before, I found them meticulous but unmemorable. Here, however, her two sculptures are scrupulous, minimally worked capsules of equilibrium and tension. There is a pleasant, ironic elegance in how the materials are manipulated, and yet their mundane identities—such as a doorframe stop or a standard length of one-by-one-inch hardwood—are completely unaltered. This formal leap in Bechtle's fascination with the ordinary is gratifying.

In Shannon Ebner's black-and-white photographs, a figure holds a large blank white board in an otherwise desolate landscape. The Los Angeles artist is known for textual interventions in natural landscapes that investigate meaning and ambiguity. These blank signs seem semantic even in their absence of text, like a wordless protest or a literal silent gesture.

In contrast with the show curated by Bechtle, in which the walls are lined with pictures, Ebner's curatorial exercise at Altman Siegel features sparsely placed objects. The artist-curators' shared attraction to the everyday yields divergent results. While Bechtle focuses on uninflected depictions of the ordinary, Ebner assembles cerebral takes on material culture—Minimalist, Conceptual, post-Minimalist and post-Conceptual gestures. Ranging from restrained to reticent to inscrutable, the selections are contingent upon each viewer for subjective connections.

Emblematic of the show is Iran Do Espirito Santo's *Water Glass 2* (2008). What appears to be a simple pint glass filled to the brim with water is actually a solid crystal form.



Iran Do Espirito Santo. *Water Glass 2*, 2008; crystal, 5 1/2 x 3 3/8 x 3 3/8 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

How something so simultaneously familiar and strange can be completely indifferent to the meanings we assign

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to it is compelling. Like *Water Glass 2*, Santo's *Can L* (2005)—a gorgeous, large food can made in brushed stainless steel—is mute but resolute. The fact of its being is itself a riddle. It recalls Roni Horn's *Library of Water* (2007), Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (1961), school cafeterias, West Coast Minimalist sculptures emphasizing polished surfaces, and the perplexing simultaneity of its functions as lens, mirror, household object, and aesthetic commodity.

Ebner nods to her oft-cited predecessor, [Ed Ruscha](#), by including his modestly sized lithograph *Unit* (2004), a classic example of the language-art master's inscrutability. Spindly serif-face letters rise above a cartoon black and red landscape. Even in specificity, ambiguity abounds: a unit of what? Language? Writing? Art? Conceptual and post-Conceptual art's intractable nature—its self-evidence, its indifference—is probably its most polarizing quality.



"They Knew What They Wanted," 2010; installation view, Altman Siegel Gallery. Courtesy of Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Even the figure populating the show speaks in the language of objects. Tom Otterness' *Broken Humpty Dumpty* (1990) is a plush doll-sized bronze. The egg-character lays prone, pennies spilling forth from his cracked shell. Humpty may symbolize capitalism, but his populist stylization and cuddliness—the dot-eyes on a sad cartoon face, a hand holding an invisible violin bow—evoke sympathy. In this room of things that slide between familiar object, conceptual gesture, and pure form, our host expresses more wordless riddles: eviscerated pennies and soundless strings.

Altman Siegel's press release states that Ebner's exhibition "is focused around the idea that reality is comprised of basic units.... By juxtaposing basic structures and timeless forms Ebner creates a picture that approximates the fullness of reality." Can setting a stage for the subjective interpretation of discrete art objects approximate "the fullness of reality"? Not if that reality is the physical, psychological, embodied one I think of. At best, the show highlights the finitude of corporeal reality in contrast with the expansive, experiential nature of consciousness, and the paradoxical

condition that experiences often stem from things, which can be affective and indifferent at the same time.

As manifested by Bechtle and Ebner, "They Knew What They Wanted" is a demonstration of the steadiness of long-term pursuits of areas of interest. Within these practices of engaging ideas about quotidian images and palimpsestic things are indications of conviction and elastic minds. The show is also a notable collaboration between four significant local galleries, who relinquished representation and curatorial privileges. The gamble evinces and extends these two California artists' practices.

"They Knew What They Wanted" is on view at [Altman Siegel Gallery](#), [Fraenkel Gallery](#), [John Berggruen Gallery](#), and [Ratio 3](#) through July 31, 2010.

[They Knew What They Wanted](#) Group Show Jul 01 - Jul 31 Fraenkel Gallery and Ratio 3 by Lea Feinstein

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For a lively summer show, Shannon Ebner, Katy Grannan, Robert Bechtle, and Jordan Kantor mined the storerooms and flat files of four San Francisco galleries (Altman Siegel, Fraenkel, John Berggruen, and Ratio 3) to create a distributed exhibition with a catchy title and a snazzy, hard-to-resist invitation: "They Knew What They Wanted." In all four venues, photographs and photo-inspired works predominate. Older, vintage, and anonymous pieces join contemporary works in juxtapositions that startle and inspire—freshening everything on display.

At Fraenkel Gallery, Katy Grannan's selection cues us to her own varied artistic predilections. Known for her sensitive, voyeuristic portraits of people on the margins of identity, she continues that exploration with "William Hawkins" (1877) (photographer unknown) and a double portrait of murderers by Richard Avedon. A handwritten entry accompanying the Hawkins photo states that he was struck by lightning and incarcerated after making threats to his wife and others. We read his face, the gesture of his hand, looking for outward signs of an inward disturbance. Avedon's "Dick Hickock, murderer, and Perry Smith, murderer, Garden City,

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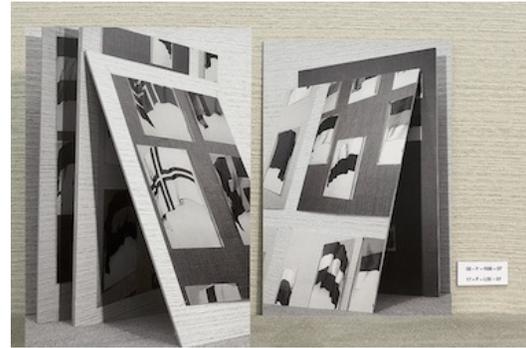
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Kansas, April 15, 1960" (1960) is flagrant in its specificity—the names of the sitters, the date of the photograph, the skewed eyes, and the tiger tattoos. Again we parse the faces, arms, and tattoos, trying to detect homicidal tendencies. Grannan's "Anonymous, Los Angeles" (2008) portrays a transsexual subject with bleached hair, earrings, and shaved belly, harshly depicted in bright daylight. S/he gently strokes a baby rabbit cradled at the breast in a tender gesture that underlines their mutual fragility and vulnerability.

Lee Friedlander's "N.Y.C." (2006) takes us behind the scenes at a couture fashion show. His cinematic and claustrophobic close-ups capture a frenetic pace as hands tease, coif, powder, dress, and disembody the passive, vacant-eyed "mannequins." As voyeurs, we witness the violence of the transformations. Nearby, Grannan pairs E.J. Bellocq's "Storyville Portrait" (1912) with *Untitled Standing Figure* (1957) by Manuel Neri. The vintage photo of a New Orleans prostitute with her face crudely obliterated by black marker seems illicit, as indeed it was a turn-of-the-century porn shot. The headlessness of the Neri sculpture seems suddenly noteworthy and "decapitated"; the figure is a sex object and no longer a mere "nude."

In a rear gallery, a collage of animal-themed images juxtaposes Charley Harper's 1960s quail, deer, and turtle designs with Peter Hujar's portrait of a boy and his cow. Garry Winogrand's image of a kneeling steer about to be struck on a highway sits alongside Will Rogan's 2006 image of delicate bird footprints embedded in cement. The momentary and elusive are arrested and captured forever.

Jordan Kantor's selection at Ratio 3 is an offbeat mix of jokes, puzzles, and eclectic inquiries into the nature of vision. He is attracted to the insignificant and the grandiose. Small black-



Miriam Böhm. "Archive V," 2008; chromogenic color print, 20 x 31 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Ratio 3, San Francisco.

and-white images by unknown photographers feature a smudgy finger on a lens and a young Eartha Kitt lookalike mimicking the bent frame of a '60s butterfly chair. In a photo collage advertising a vaudeville song-and-dance man, the actor struts and splits in multiple poses, performing impossible stunts, eager to please.

In Kantor's own work, the camera is a tool for image gathering, not an end in itself. His found images are translated into paintings. Neither the photo nor the painting is foremost, but the idea behind the subject, the history of the moment portrayed, is paramount. "Parcae Constellation in Draco (Naval Ocean Surveillance System/USA 160)" (2008), Trevor Paglen's telescopic photo of spy satellite tracks in the distant night sky, fits neatly into this category. The image itself is unspectacular, like a diagram in a science book. As with much of Paglen's work, only when we know what it depicts does it rivet our attention. Science and investigative reporting are framed as art, and the lengthy title is critical to how we view the image. Eadweard Muybridge's "Adjutant, Flying Run" (1887), a stop-motion study of a young pelican beginning its flight, also straddles the divide between art and science. His photographic observations of animal motion with their distinctive grid format are endlessly fascinating, and were long ago appropriated by practitioners of contemporary art. The viewer's eye zooms in, detecting the details of each frame, then zooms out to record the whole design.

History is reconstructed and fabricated in Lutz Bacher's *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview* (1976). In nine framed photostatic copies printed as negatives and displayed as a horizontal frieze, the artist performs a looping, invented, self-interrogation. She is simultaneously a brazen journalist (the interviewer) and Oswald's surrogate (the interviewee). She mixes degraded newspaper photos and ragged typescript to create the disjunctive visual equivalent of a dialogue in a Samuel Beckett play, questioning the nature of reality. A photographic salad, the form of her work embodies the twisted "history" of the events leading up to the John F.



Installation, Fraenkel Gallery. Lee Friedlander's "N.Y.C. 2006" series on left, and Manuel Neri's *Untitled Standing Figure* (1957) at right. Courtesy of the Artists and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

Kennedy assassination and Oswald's pivotal role in the still-unsolved mystery.

The show also features minimalist works in several media. Shannon Ebner's "Los Angeles Series" (2009) and Miriam Böhm's "Archive V" (2008) are cerebral conceptual photographs about photographic vision and the monocular eye, the illusion of three-dimensional space subverted by the reality of a flat surface. Vija Celmins' mezzotint engraving *Untitled (web 3)* (2002) and Alighiero Boetti's *Centri di Pensiero* (1978) are the slow motion antitheses of the photographic process. *Centri di Pensiero* is a ballpoint pen rendering of an elliptical two-page "text" in which the alphabet crowds the left margin (y-axis), and commas are scattered like constellations on a summer night (x-axis). Celmins' image of a spider's web was meticulously crafted by rocking a small multi-pointed tool back and forth across a metal plate. The density and intensity of these works are achieved by arduous and repetitive mark-making, bordering on obsession.

The Ratio 3 show doesn't wallow in the sensuous physical world but spins and delineates ideas. Largely monochromatic and heavily conceptual, it appeals to and stimulates the mind, not the heart, of a viewer. In contrast, many works in the Fraenkel show elicit sharp emotional responses. A wall of snapshots by anonymous photographers emphasizes the role that "taking pictures" has assumed in modern life, recording the momentous and the carefully composed, as well as the fleeting and the ordinary.