



Group Think

Hairy Eyeball: Current exhibition "They Knew What They Wanted" invades four different SF galleries
07.13.10 - 4:32 pm | [Matt Sussman](#) |

HAIRY EYEBALL "Calder to Warhol," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's giant introductory survey of the Fisher collection, isn't the only big summer show happening right now. With its wanted poster-style flyer design and a menacing title that could have come from a hardboiled paperback, "They Knew What They Wanted" is an exquisite corpse of a group show, pieced together and then strewn across town by four artists at four different galleries: Shannon Ebner at Altman Siegel, Robert Bechtle at John Berggruen, Katy Grannan at Fraenkel Gallery, and Jordan Kantor at Ratio 3.



Allusions to criminality aside, the artists/curators of "They Knew What They Wanted" would more likely be found on the forensics team than the wrong side of the law. All are steely observers whose art could broadly be said to share a focus on the dynamics of surveillance at work within postwar portrait and landscape photography, particularly photography that looked at what was booming outside of America's urban centers. Although Grannan is the sole photographer in the group, Ebner's temporary installations of handmade signage placed in public settings — which she then photographs in black and white — and Bechtle and Kantor's photo-based oil paintings also fall under the sign of the photography.

It's not surprising then that multiple pieces by each of the curators can be found across all four galleries, as well as certain names (Lee Friedlander, Miriam Böhm, Trevor Paglen, and Ed Ruscha in particular) whose work shares an aesthetic affinity with that of the curators. This form of cross-gallery display gives "They Knew What They Wanted" a cohesion that is often rare in group shows, while still not being so insular as to make it hard to differentiate each artist-curator's own aesthetic sense.

Bechtle's selections offer the least surprises, summoning the same post-1960s Western suburban milieu evoked by his photorealistic paintings of driveway-bound vintage cars. After a few rounds of viewing, though, Robert Adams' vintage snaps of Colorado 'burbs, Friedlander's skewed takes on small town architecture, Isca Greenfield-Sanders' aquatint etchings of backyard swimmers, and Tom McKinley's oils of cool modernist interiors start to add up to the visual equivalent of tract housing.

Ebner and Kantor's picks are more interior-minded than the mainly street-level and exterior scenes crowding John Berggruen. They also veer the furthest from each artist's own work. For example, Sol LeWitt's blink-and-you'll-miss-it painted electrical wall plate at Altman Siegel is just a few Home Depot aisles away from Rachel Whiteread's stainless steel castings of light switches over at Ratio 3. Back at Altman Siegel, Fletcher Benton's 1983 bronze tennis racket, "Adjustable Racket for Short Heavy Hitters," leans dejectedly in a corner, in wait for a yard sale that will never come. Grannan's grab bag at Fraenkel is the most photo-heavy, and her selection ventures furthest — with mixed success — from the thematic territory staked out by Bechtle, Ebner, and Kantor.

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In a way, Ebner, Bechtle, Grannan, and Kantor have beat SFMOMA to the punch. The museum is set to restage the landmark 1975 photography exhibit "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" — which presented dispassionate documentation of parking lots, construction sites, and other forms of ex-urban development — at the end of the month. But for a sustained exploration of the meteor-like impact of "New Topographics" on the photography and painting that followed in its wake, one couldn't ask for a better art historical crash-course than "They Knew What They Wanted." *