

Art in Review



At Andrea Rosen Gallery, left, an installation view of “The Wedding,” a group show organized by Ydessa Hendeles, and, above “In the Studio Twenty Eleven,” by Michael St. John.

‘The Wedding’

(The Walker Evans Polaroid Project)

Michael St. John

‘In the studio Twenty Eleven’

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 4

The cooked and the raw go head to head in these two exhibitions. The main event and cooked portion is “The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project),” an inspired if somewhat lugubrious group show orchestrated by Ydessa Hendeles, a Canadian collector and respected independent (and independently wealthy) curator. Over the last 30 years Ms. Hendeles has become known for staging idiosyncratic exhibitions in her eponymous art foundation in Toronto, increasingly mixing contemporary art from her collection with other acquisitions, including vintage photographs and unusual antiques. At Rosen her first effort in New York pairs effectively with a show of the relatively fibrous collage-paintings that constitute the artist Michael St. John’s latest excursions into contemporary culture and its

discontents.

Characterized as “a curatorial composition,” Ms. Hendeles’s “Wedding” is less an exhibition than an elegiac installation piece. It carefully pits art against craft, the quick against the dead and, to my mind, fact and document (exemplified by photography) against faith and memory (represented by Gothic style). Ms. Hendeles finds traces of the Gothic sensibility in the Arts and Crafts furniture of Gustav Stickley, a photograph of an ancient Paris shop front by Eugène Atget and a monumental 19th-century mahogany bird cage in the form of a square, lavishly domed cathedral, crystal palace or mausoleum.

This magnificent object sits at the center of a large, gray-walled gallery, flanked reverentially by eight diminutive pewlike benches (meticulous reproductions of a child’s settle by Stickley). The mix also includes a lovely 19th-century wood miniature of a cooper’s (or barrelmaker’s) workshop, complete with tiny tools and parquet floor, and a grid of astounding photographs, dated 1887, from Eadweard Muybridge’s “Animal Locomotion” series. In them an adjutant, or giant stork, wings awkwardly akimbo, seems about to take flight.

The big mahogany bird cage

functions as a kind of mother ship for a selection of 68 small images, mostly of Victorian, Gothic-inflected houses that the great American photographer Walker Evans (1903-75) made shortly before his death, using the new Polaroid SX-70. Ringing the gallery in a single closely spaced line, they reiterate his crystalline, groundbreaking black-and-white images of vernacular architecture from the 1930s, but with fuzzy forms, seeping color and fading light. Here they form a relentless march of ghostly mirages that only pauses, at the center of each wall, for a photographic work by the sculptor Roni Horn: a pair of large color images of the heads of exotic, taxidermied birds, seen from behind.

Elegantly clear, with each feather in place, Ms. Horn’s bird images snap Ms. Hendeles’s presentation into focus. Portraying possible residents of the bird cage, they are the opposite of both Evans’s small blurry domiciles and Muybridge’s struggling adjutant. From afar the birds’ silhouettes can bring to mind Gothic arches. Up close they might be looking at the Polaroids; they could also be couples (same sex or not) exchanging marriage vows at the altar.

It is fascinating to parse the web of possible connections, contrasts

and meanings that permeate “The Wedding.” But it helps that the presentation’s slightly precious air is offset by the bracing, seemingly uncouth Americana of “In the Studio Twenty Eleven,” Mr. St. John’s show in the back gallery. Inspired by a Jasper Johns painting, his nine new works teach the old dogs of appropriation and collage new tricks, partly through the use of sparkling, minimally painted canvases. Employing modernist abstraction as a kind of bulletin board that also suggests a chunk of art-studio wall, each presents a spare but suggestive assortment of cheap and expendable items — photographs, trinkets, newspaper clippings, decals, small objects and the odd drawing or note — that, like the works in Ms. Hendeles’s show, form a kind of rebus. Most of the items are real, although the tacks and pushpins holding hold them in place are actually painted on. With the ephemeral as a common thread Mr. St. John slyly fuses trompe l’oeil painting with a small, portable version of installation art. Somehow it is a very memorable lesson.

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