

The Art of New York Living



Photography Values

by Kenneth Jay Linsner

From its inception, the argument has raged between those who thought of photography merely as a craft — a better way to get a true image of the world — and those who felt it was something more.

A great portrait photographer of the 1950s, Philippe Halsman once took a self-portrait showing his head on a tripod. When asked about it, he explained that “this is where the photographs come from — not the camera.”

Until the most recent past, his work was largely ignored, and the work of both young and old talents was relegated to the galleries of photography dealers where it would be displayed against museum-white walls and lit, invariably, by standard track lighting. Often arranged almost like a Prussian regiment, the images themselves were often drained of their “art” quality.

This approach has changed, as can be seen in the sale of photos by Richard Prince at the major auction houses over the last two seasons. In November one of his images offered by Christie’s, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, brought in an astonishing \$1,248,000. This had been preceded by sales of others of his images in the range of \$100,000 to \$600,000 — equally amazing. Five years ago in a standard sale of photographs, these images would have brought, at best, between \$1,000 and \$10,000. What changed?

It is probable that the realization that contemporary photographs are Art with a capital “A” has had a lot to do with it. While such icons as Warhol and others of his ilk have always been able to penetrate that veil between fine



Photograph by Ann Simkins

arts and photography, most photographers have been unable to do so until fairly recently.

Generally speaking, the market has recognized, as have the auction houses, that the work of this younger generation (and some of the older established photographers) had less to do with the capturing of shadows and more to do with the general philosophical trends of the period. Once this leap is made photography becomes an integral part of the fine arts.

Younger photographers can still be reasonably purchased, while those who have stepped to the other side in the eyes of the collector, such as Anna Mendieta, whose 1976 vintage print *Arbol de Vida* went for \$102,000 at auction at Christie’s this past November, cannot. Another example, from her *Woodman* series, made \$83,650 at Phillips in its photography sale of October 2003 — a harbinger of things to come.

I am constantly examining the work of younger photographers and recently arranged for the show of a young Russian, Elena Ulantseva, here in New York. Her work, once mainly

for *Vogue* magazine, has become detached from those roots and warranted another look. Other less obscure, though undervalued, individuals of note include Tony Vaccaro, who contributed to both photojournalism and the fashion photography genre, and Duane Michals, known for his story sequences; Boyd Webb and Judith Roy Ross represent a more youthful yet still overlooked group.

Marshall McLuhan once said that “the medium was the message,” and while this remained true in the photography market for decades, it is now no longer the whole truth. A second look is due to some younger talents and a decision to pull them through to the other side of the photography/fine art divide should and will be made.

As New Yorkers we have been given a unique opportunity to put our two cents into the mix both literally, from the standpoint of being in the right place at the right time to purchase some of these works, and figuratively — this is certainly one of the joys and opportunities of New York living.

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