

## AMARANTH

*n. 1. an imaginary flower, that according to legend, never fades and typifies immortality. Origin: 1545–55; < L amarantus, alter. of Gk amáronton never-fading flower.*

The photographs in this show originated as a unique partnership between Max Mara and the renowned photography program at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City. Each fall and spring for the past 14 years, Max Mara has chosen students to have solo shows at its premier store on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. Appropriately titled *New Visions*, the exhibits create interplay between the art of photography and the art of fashion. This speaks to the value of the extraordinary commitment Max Mara has to art and education.

Being selected to exhibit was a transformative experience for these Parsons graduates because it gave them a priceless validation and confidence in their art at a key time in their artistic development.

Although these photographs span 14 years, many genres, technologies and theories, this show is remarkably unified. Being able to create a cohesive show from work created by 30 artists is a tribute to the vision of Max Mara and of its visual directors who have chosen photographs that are as “classic and enduring” as the clothes the company designs and produces.

The show is a testament to the nature of photography, which has retained certain characteristics as it has matured. If noted theorist Walter Benjamin was right when he wrote that a medium comes of age when it starts to be interrogated, then photography has certainly come of age as the most contemporary of contemporary art.

These photographs, coming from students steeped in interrogating and being interrogated by their professors at Parsons, shine eternally with prescience, steadfastly insist on tradition, expand the boundaries of the medium, playfully poke fun at photo theory, create order from chaos, obscure the clear and clarify the obscure.

Because photography is so technology dependent, it has evolved physically, not just aesthetically as most art does in reaction to social, political and cultural changes. Remarkably and wonderfully, though, without the dates on the labels it isn't always clear what work was created when. Some of the work in this show, such as George Saitas' images of car headlines and tail lights leering and winking at the viewer, are film based, made when digital technology was in its infancy. Some of the images that look as if they were run through Adobe Photoshop™, such as Brian McCarty's playful references to the conspiracy theories surrounding the super secret Area 51 in Nevada, were created in the camera. Aaron Hillebrand's wall of repeating pink glazed donuts which reference Pop Art and circular eternity could only be done with digital technology. Other work such as Izabella Demavlys' eye popping pouting portrait so fully integrates digital technology that the technology becomes irrelevant.

If the task of the camera is to see what the eye cannot or does not, then these artists have used their cameras well. We have to peer deeply into Nathan Anderson's toned and bleached silver gelatin prints to discern what lurks in the layers of shadow of the New Jersey turnpike at night, or in the woods of Maine. In Lee Balzano's deft hand, a flashlight hides and illuminates only parts of the frame, revealing the hidden emotional layers in every relationship. Photography can create a different spatial memory exploited so well by Hanna Ljungh with her blurry image of what appears to be a tree and a dark figure in the distance. Or is it? Has she played games with our perception by constructing a miniature set?

Photography can impose order on a chaotic world. Within the frame and that one moment that the photographer presses the shutter, pandemonium stops, momentarily. Judith Stephens skillfully exploits this characteristic in her installation piece on New York City's Chinatown. In each small frame she isolates a noisy, cluttered and cacophonous moment and if we choose, we can stop and quietly engage with the image just as if we were stopping on a busy street in Chinatown to observe one thing. But then she transports us back into the totality of the chaos by covering the wall with a plethora of small moments, and as we step back and look at all of it we are drawn into the colors, the people, the sound, the smells of Chinatown.

Photography can be realistic, pictorial, conceptual, constructed and deconstructed. We have all of that in this show, which is almost a brief history of photography, but one element doesn't change and that is the photograph's relationship to time. Jared Moosy creates immortality for the Afghani man he so elegantly frames, wrapped tightly in a blanket to ward off the cold or the wind. But just as photography clarifies it also obscures because this moment isn't reality. The man fills the frame, forever etched in our memory, even though we know that what might be happening just outside that frame contradicts the quietness of this moment. It is but one point in time, one representation of one photographer's decision to push the button. But through that truth the past comes alive and through it we collectively hope for our future. Photography is the most eternal of art forms, as we are reminded in Darwisa Kagalanan's black and white image of a quiet, empty room with a single table and wooden chair, the light trying to illuminate the darkness through thick white curtains. Even as the image is still, it pulsates with the life that we know has passed through this room. And when we see her image of a baby, deep in sleep as only a child can be, with no worries, no concerns, the soft light gently caressing the soft skin, we are invited to hope and dream about what the future may hold for this child. And for us. We are reassured that humanity, like the amaranth, will not fade away.

The photograph is the only medium that simultaneously exists in the past, present and future. The moment photographed was the present but as soon as the image is made, that present becomes past. The viewer experiences the actual photograph in the present, but then is drawn into the past moment that the photograph has become, and propelled into contemplating the future, either the viewer's own or what she might imagine from the past presented in the photograph. A photograph triggers a memory in part because it is the familiarity of the scene that draws us in and then by reference we construct or reconstruct our memories of our past or present. We relive experiences. In Frick Byers' gorgeous images of Southampton, New York, at summer's end, we feel bleached dry by the sun, and wrapped in the eternal and shared feeling of melancholia that overcomes us on that last day of summer. As the soft light floats across the beach, fading, it steals the innocence of that first kiss, that first summer romance, or the warmth from an old man's body as he sits at the beach edge. Chris Nesbit deals more directly with time in his images in which he juxtaposes drawings of buildings long since renovated or torn down on top of the current landscape to create an undulating past and present, forcing the viewer to think about the intersection of urban life with the history of a place long lost or of the people who stood in the same spot as Nesbit did when he took the photograph. And the people who will stand there one hundred years hence.

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