ART REVIEW: Flotsam Found at MoMA's "Ocean of Images"

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by James Croak

Museums show old things arranged into a coherent narrative, such is their charge, but a problem arises when they show old things and market them as new things. This is the situation that currently applies at MoMA, where they have laid a second giant egg (after Bjork the swan), a new iteration of the museum's reoccurring photography survey, this year entitled "Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015."

The exhibition was organized by Chief Curator of Photography Quentin Bajac; Lucy Gallun, assistant curator; and Roxana Marcoci, senior curator; with the assistance of Kristen Gaylord, Beaumont & Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow, Department of Photography.

After spotting the 1960s-style wall-covering super-graphics announcing the show, I entered and then just as quickly left, twice, to circle the museum's third floor looking for the show, thinking this freezer-burned appetizer couldn't possibly be the actual entrée. Upon entering the third time the second clue that something was amiss was the expression on the faces of visitors sauntering through the exhibition. It was much the same as what they would look like when drifting through the lines at the Department of Motor Vehicles, except they left this room more quickly.

This show is a routine montage of dissimilar images having little relationship to each other and certainly none to viewers. It has all the specificity of goulash, the art fair approach to curating: splash it all together and hope meaning arises. The curators ignored the individuality of the works and the actual vision of the artists and instead crammed everything together inches apart, in the apparent hope that a new art form would appear.

Similarly one could spill all the ingredients of the refrigerator into a pan, turn on the heat and pray that a coherent and delicious meal appears. It will not. More importantly, this technique has been used so often without success in pop culture for so many decades in pop culture; by what confused theory do these curators imagine it will fly here?

In the dystopian 1976 hit film, "The Man Who Fell to Earth," David Bowie plays an alien—or himself depending on one's point of view—who came to Earth looking for water. His pastime while here was watching 12 televisions at once, and director Nicolas Roeg played on this image-stacking device many times during the film.

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Still from "The Man Who Fell to Earth."

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This idea was compelling and insightful then, and much ink was spilled explaining how this river of images affected our minds in everyday life, but that was 41 years ago. Judging from the birthdates of the exhibitors in this show most of them couldn't yet sit upright in a hi-chair.

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Roeg's montage was an early film inclusion of this curious device, but artist Robert Rauschenberg and others were creating paintings with this image-jam at least a decade earlier, as can be seen in his 1965 "Sleep for Yvonne Rainer."

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"Sleep for Yvonne Rainer" by Robert Rauschenberg, 1965.

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In Rauschenberg's painting we have a covered military vehicle, a Sunkist advertisement, a Baroque frieze, a 35mm film container and other detritus having nothing to do with one another. Now compare this Rauschenberg painting with the main wall at "Ocean of Images," a wall installation by Iraeli Ilit Zaoulay.

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"Shifting Degrees of Certainty (detail)" by Ilit Azoulay, 2014.

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One is a doppelganger for the other. It's the same empty-the-attic onto a wall shtick that Rauschenberg used to transition painting from abstract expressionism to pop art half a century ago. This not a contemporary survey; this is contemporary mannerism.

The image-stacking technique that emerged through the fine arts moved quickly into advertising and even pre-school education. A standard 1960s Head Start lesson was to have four- and five-year-olds scissor images from magazines and affix them to a piece of shirt board to create an "interior montage," as the jargon went at the time, based upon the image theory of Jean Piaget.

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"Ocean of Images" installation shot.

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Above we see an actual installation shot exhibiting many different images by different artists from different countries with different world views. No, they were not later separated and hung; this web-surfing imitation is the final product, except recycled here as "post-internet" and "zines" according to the gushy press release.

Writers are wary of new words as chefs are wary of new seasonings. Neologisms are good salt and pepper in a text if they season something other than themselves, but what is being pointed to with the silly "post-internet?" Many in the world have yet to get the internet, and it is being extended every day, begging the question of "post" for whom, exactly? Post-curation would be less dishonest. "Zines" for magazines? How excitingly beatnik.

What is missing from this show is a coherent and elucidating central vision and collection of images that will shed light on the human condition. Such is the purpose of attending a museum. These curators failed to assemble like-minded work and instead substitute the shopworn device of image stacking, marketed with some thin writing.

The exhibiting artists (aka innocent bystanders) are: Ilit Azoulay (Israeli), Zbyněk Baladrán (Czechoslovokia), Lucas Blalock (U.S.A.), Edson Chagas (Angola), Natalie Czech (Germany), DIS (Collective, New York), Katharina Gaenssler (Germany), David Hartt (Canada), Mishka Henner (Belgium), David Horvitz (U.S.A.), John Houck (U.S.A.), Yuki Kimura (Japan), Anouk Kruithof (Netherlands), Basim Magdy (Egypt), Katja Novitskova (Estonia), Marina Pinsky (Russia), Lele Saveri (Italy), Indrė Šerpytytė (Lithuania), and Lieko Shiga (Japan).

BASIC FACTS: "Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015" remains on view through March 20, 2016. The Museum of Modern Art is located at 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019. 212.708.9400, www.moma.org.