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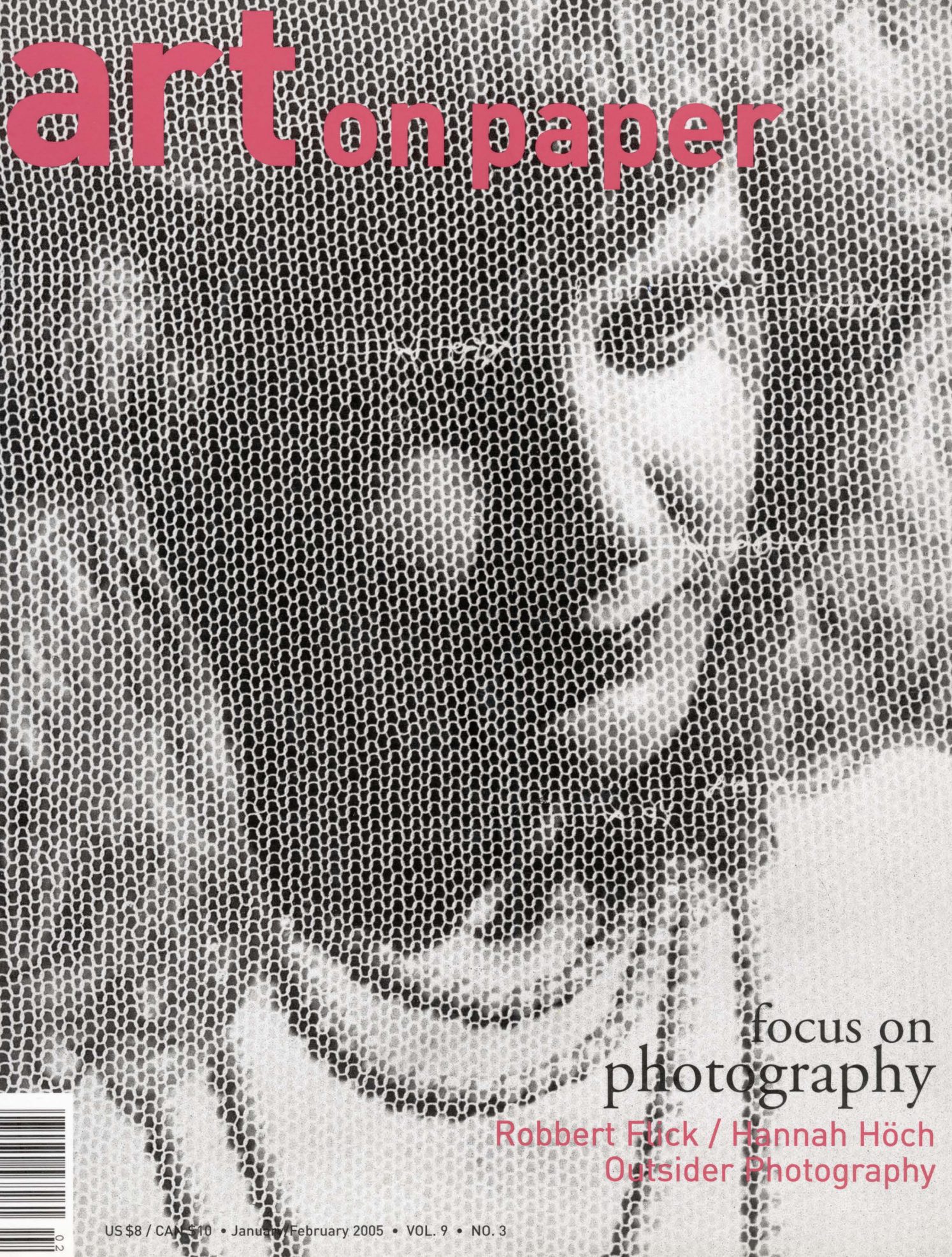

focus on photography

Robbert Flick / Hannah Höch

Outsider Photography

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Robbert Flick's Photographic Trajectories

Using systems and intuition to make sense of the City of Angels

by Leslie Jones

In 1979, photographer Robbert Flick was asked to participate in the "Los Angeles Documentary Project," an N.E.A.-funded program organized in conjunction with the city's bicentennial in which each photographer was asked to submit single-frame photographs representative of the city. "The idea was totally crazy to me," he declared in a recent interview with me at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where the retrospective exhibition "Trajectories: The Photographic Work of Robbert Flick" is on view through January 9, 2005. "How do you photograph Los Angeles in a single photograph?" Without a notable skyline (as in New York) or an impressive monument (as in Paris), L.A. evades any single-frame representation. Indeed, what confounds most visitors to the city is the lack of a center, a place from which to orient oneself. L.A. is actually a city of many cities connected by a system of never-ending boulevards and freeways that makes driving essential to one's experience. Flick used this indisputable fact to come up with a process and format that characterizes his work to this day.

Born in The Netherlands in 1939 and raised there, as well as on Aruba in the Dutch West Indies, Flick moved to Vancouver

[SV951221_Pico C], along Pico Looking North, from Appian Way, Santa Monica, to Central Avenue, Los Angeles, from "L.A. Documents," C-print (40 1/4 x 64 1/2 in.), 1994–99 (detail). Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art.


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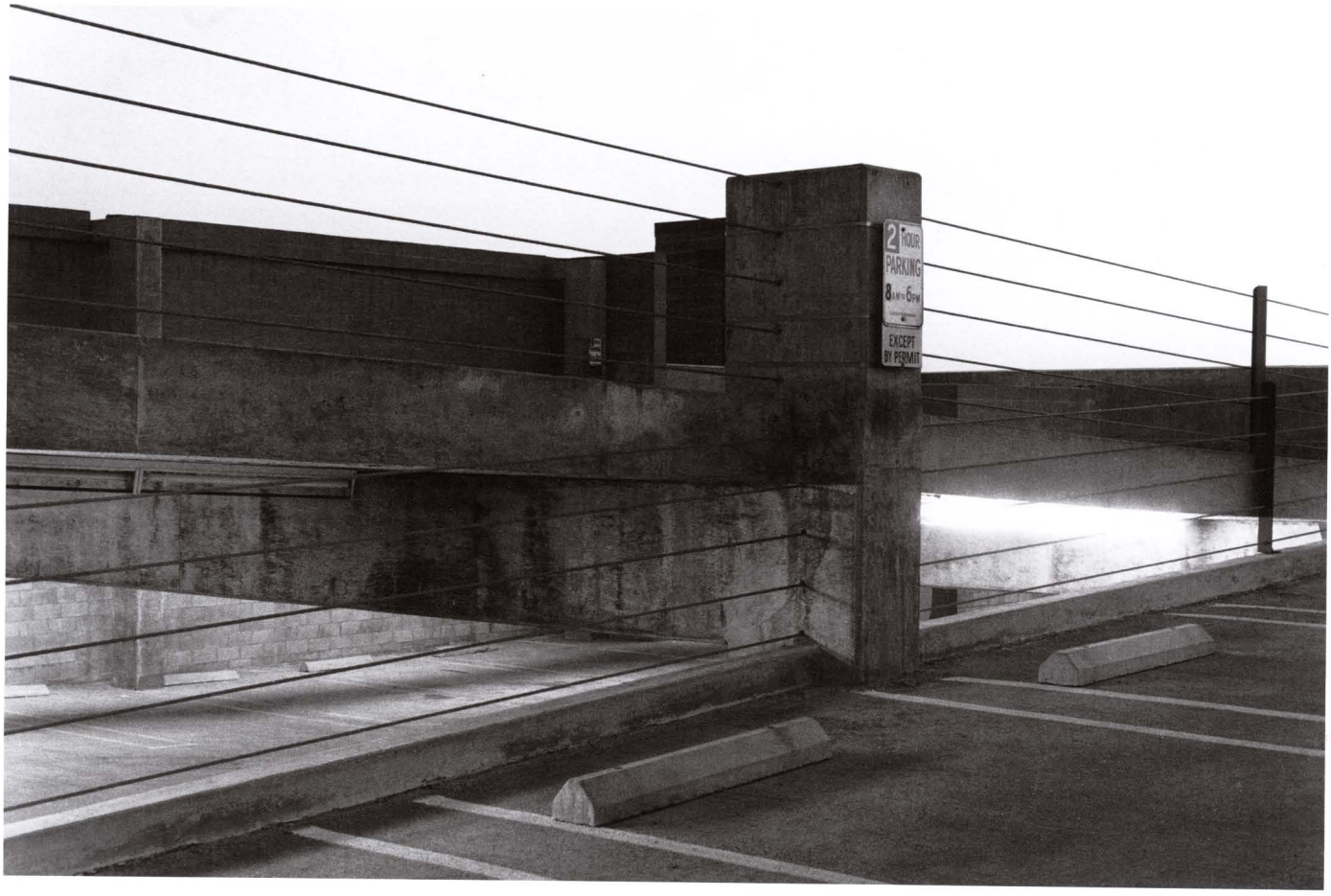
***SV008/80, Manhattan Beach, Looking North*, from "Sequential Views," gelatin-silver print (15 5/8 x 21 1/2 in.), ca. 1980. Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art.**

in 1958 and to Los Angeles in 1968. In Vancouver he discovered the difference between photographing the city and the countryside. "The flux of the city didn't allow for the kind of prolonged focus that the countryside allowed me."

In response to the invitation to participate in the Los Angeles Documentary Project, Flick began working on a series he titled "Sequential Views." In *SVOO8/80 Manhattan Beach, Looking North* (ca. 1980), for example, "each of the intersections that exists on the grid of the map functioned as loci for the way of taking the picture." Walking a predetermined route through Manhattan Beach, he stopped at each intersection and took a shot facing north. The resulting work is composed of 100 images in a grid format that visually re-create "this sort of hop, skip movement" of driving while also charting Flick's trajectory in a systematic way.

The "Sequential Views" series was not Flick's first attempt to capture L.A. through photographs. Ten years earlier, as a graduate student at U.C.L.A., he had produced "L.A. Diary"—a series of superimposed images of city signs, traffic signals, and clocks created by exposing the film multiple times. Although such images evoke the random and simultaneous nature of urban visual experience, the incorporation of chance and coincidence in the process reflects, according to Flick, another place in time altogether. "Each time period," he explains, "places its own kind of stamp on you . . . I see place in terms of the time that I live and with all the baggage I bring with it." He describes the cultural dialogue of his graduate years (1970–71) as being "wide-open," reflecting the infinite possibilities associated with having just landed a man on the moon and, in cultural terms, with John Cage's music. By 1976, following a five-year teaching hiatus in Champaign, Illinois, the dialogue in L.A. had "stopped being open and became, in a sense, potentially closed," referring, perhaps, to the change in the sociopolitical climate characterized by the Watergate scandal and the energy crisis.

Accordingly, the system with which Flick made his photographs became more closed, relating to the mood of the period as well as his personal situation. As a new instructor at U.S.C. (where he continues to teach today), he had less time to seek out locations and, primarily out of convenience, began to make work based on the empty parking structure behind his studio in Inglewood. The result is the "Arena Series" (1977–79), which, in its attention to cement columns, railings, painted lines, and



***79047-26*, from the "Arena Series," gelatin-silver print (8 7/8 x 13 1/4 in.), 1977. Courtesy of the artist and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.**

arrows, depicts its subject with a technical finesse and compositional allure that would make even the most jaded Angeleno reconsider his/her daily parking experience. Far from deadpan (in the manner of Ed Ruscha's *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, for example), "Flick did for a parking garage in Inglewood . . . [w]hat Ansel Adams did for Yosemite," proclaimed Christopher Knight in a recent review of the exhibition. Yet, the "Arena Series" was not intended simply to monumentalize a lowly parking structure. According to Flick, it provided him with a closed "arena" in which to practice and to perform; "[i]t became a journey tracing my shifts in perception in relation to what was essentially a fixed condition."

When Flick started working on the "Sequential Views" series the following year, he also worked with a "fixed condition," yet it was one of format (the grid) rather than location. The notion of systems was, of course, fundamental to artistic practice of the 1960s and '70s, and the grid represented a non-hierarchical and seemingly objective means of presenting information. Based on a trajectory predetermined by a map, each of the 100 images in Flick's "sequential view" of Manhattan Beach is independent, yet contingent upon the image that precedes and follows it. It functions as a sort of document with Flick as the discerning archivist.

Flick was photographing L.A. at the same time that he was making "Sequential Views" in desert regions of the West, such as Joshua Tree and Red Rock. Without map coordinates, he followed his internal guide, opting to take a photograph whenever there was a change in his spatial encounter with a cactus or rock, for example. The grid format suggests a system, yet the images themselves derive from the photographer's intuitive sense. The varying ratio between system and intuition is, according to LACMA exhibition curator Tim J. Wride, central to the development of Flick's work: "Once you throw the grid of the city out and move into nature, the ratio (of system over intuition) flips . . . and the intuition takes precedence, while the system functions in a looser sense."

System and intuition continue their dialogue in Flick's most recent and still ongoing series entitled "L.A. Documents." In 1990, he traded in his still camera for a Hi8 video camera and, following the advancement of imaging technology, today uses digital video. With the video camera mounted behind the front seat of his car, Flick has driven the lengths of many of L.A.'s major boulevards, recording everything en route. From this footage, he pieces together a selection of still images that "read"

from left to right, top to bottom, creating a variety of visual rhythms. According to Flick: "It's . . . like making use of sampling . . . You construct things. You repeat things. So if I want to look at something with attention, I can manipulate it a little bit." Flick's "double-takes" create a visual stutter that calls attention to particular buildings, cars, signs, etc. through repetition or abbreviation.

While Flick's process of collecting imagery, such as filming 15.7 miles of Pico Boulevard, is methodical, his editing process reflects his perception of each place as a "visual ecology." According to Flick: "I'm interested in this fabric of the city as a series of really extraordinary inventories of how people are and where people settle and the dreams that are there. Reading the façade is a way of accessing dreams." In his tripartite composition devoted to Pico Boulevard, *(SV951221), along Pico looking North, from Appian Way, Santa Monica, to Central Avenue, Los Angeles (in three parts, A–C)* (ca. 1994–99), Flick traverses a diverse cross-section of L.A. demographics, from the prosperous beach community of Santa Monica through the Jewish area of Pico/Robertson, then on to Koreatown, and the Hispanic neighborhood of Pico Union until the boulevard dead-ends at the Coca-Cola factory downtown. One can see this change even while looking at the photographic composition from a distance, as the "palette" changes from sky blue and pastels to grays and browns sprinkled with bright fiesta-like colors.

***(At Cambria-A_01082401), at Cambria looking West (from Santa Monica Museum of Art)*, C-print (50 x 80 in.), 2001. Collection of Penni and Duke Wynne, courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art.**

Flick embraces the documentary aspect of his work. "Since I'm getting all that information," he explained, "I'm interested in how somebody else, like an anthropologist, sees it. If you're a sociologist what do you look for? I want to have an open field, even though I'm structuring it." To this end, he has collaborated with urban historian Phillip J. Ethington, who has designed a Web site devoted to "Los Angeles and the Problem of Urban Historical Knowledge," on which several of Flick's "L.A. Documents" appear.

The most recent work in the LACMA exhibition is *At Cambria* (2001)—a tripartite composition depicting the ocean from the beach at sunrise. For the first time in a long while, Flick stood still, recording his subject as it ebbed and flowed for 45 minutes. Although technically not an "L.A. Document" (since Cambria is about four hours north of L.A. by car), the work speaks to the city's forever-present but oft-forgotten proximity to nature. The ocean's motion is constant but without direction, and its surface unmappable, making it an unlikely subject for Flick. Perhaps, as with his desert images, Flick allows intuition to take precedence. Rather than triggering the shutter in response to his encounters with objects *in* space, he passively absorbs (via the eye of the video camera) the immeasurability *of* space.

***Leslie Jones** is an art historian and critic based in Los Angeles.*

Art in America

Robbert Flick

LOS ANGELES,

at ROSEGALLERY

REVIEWS MAY 29, 2014

by Colin Westerbeck

The people who have taken an interest in Robbert Flick's photography range from colleagues at the University of Southern California with whom he has collaborated—one a cartographer, the other a geographer—to *Los Angeles Times* literary critic David L. Ulin, who wrote the lead essay for the catalogue published with Flick's 2004 retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Times* art critic Christopher Knight said, in his review, that Flick "occupies a significant position among a host of important artists."

Robbert Flick:*P2830718-763*, 2011-13, pigment print, 40 by 63 inches; at ROSEGALLERY.

Although his subject matter has changed, the way Flick works has remained consistent from the early 1970s, when he cruised rural Illinois roads photographing the grid in which cornfields were planted, until today, when he cruises the L.A. freeways and photographs the gridlock and swoosh of the traffic. In 1979, he began to present the photographs themselves in grids of up to 100 prints.
What affects how these grids look more than new subjects is the new technologies Flick has adopted. Around 1990, while photographing in L.A. neighborhoods, he sped up how he worked by getting back in a car instead of walking and by trading in his view camera for a Hi8 video cam. The videos were shot automatically from the back seat while Flick drove. The appeal of video was that he didn't have to spend hours in a darkroom before editing the work. He could cut out frames digitally to get the still-camera effect he wanted.

Editing is always a delicate negotiation in which Flick preserves the objectivity of his process, making the pictures useful to cartographers or geographers, while also intervening aesthetically to create a visual poem that appeals to book critics and art critics. He never changes the order of the images. Even when shooting blind with video, he could cut and paste his sequences afterward to give them the formal structure on which pictorial art relies. This balancing act is especially powerful in his most recent work, which entails yet another advance in his technology.

Around 2004, Flick decided to get a designated driver, and this liberated him to go back to the still camera a few years later. He now uses a hand-size Lumix digital model so precise that even the blur of a moving truck is sharp. This level of detail makes each image articulate enough to give Flick greater control over his sequences—over how a passing fancy in any one relates to the next one, or to an image a row below it, etc. Thus, in one grid at Rose Gallery, the trajectory of a car follows the curve of an on-ramp, except that the car is *under* the ramp, not on it. (A few frames later we see that the car is on top of a transporter truck.) In other pieces, a sign hovering above the roadside seems to swing toward us, as if we were sitting still and it were in motion. Elsewhere, three successive red cars seem to accelerate diagonally, their blurred traces moving down from one row to another, as if pulled by gravity.

Flick's work has become more agile, precise and rich since he picked up the Lumix, when he was 40 years into his career. Only the great poets, like Yeats, get better as they get older.

ART TALK with EDWARD GOLDMAN

Tuesday February 25, 2014:

If you live in Los Angeles and don't like driving through the maddening spread of streets and freeways of this metropolis, you don't live in the same city that I do. After all, don't you think that living in London and complaining about its rainy weather is rather silly? I do remember my first experience being on the 405 here in LA. It was nighttime and the traffic was dense. My American uncle complained about it, but I looked in front of me, and what I saw were rivers of white and red lights streaming through the night. Call me helplessly romantic, but even now, three decades later, I see these rivers as a flow of rubies and diamonds or, if you prefer, streams of blood and milk feeding our City of Angels.

Robbert Flick, "P2730297-352," 2011-2012
Robbert Flick: Freeways exhibition at ROSEGALLERY
Photo courtesy ROSEGALLERY

Which brings me to the intriguing exhibition of photographs by well known LA artist **Robbert Flick at ROSEGALLERY.** Flick has been known for creating what is described as conceptual photographic landscapes of the city. Each of his landscapes consists of dozens and dozens of photos made while driving a car along the freeway. Looking at his freeway landscapes, one can easily see him as the painter making brushstrokes, or hear him as the musician beating on a drum.

The New York Sun

A Wild Sense of Freedom
By WILLIAM MEYERS
January 18, 2007

Bergamont Station is the center of the art market in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. It is a 5 1/2–acre site the city of Santa Monica bought as a park-and-ride stop for a Metro train that never arrived. Instead, the long, corrugated metal warehouse sheds were converted into 35 galleries, a museum, and a café, and the 350 parking spaces serve consumers of art rather than commuters. It is L.A.'s Chelsea.

There are differences between the art photography worlds of the two coasts. The first is one of scale. Photograph, the bi-monthly international guide to photography exhibitions, has 111 listings for New York City in its current issue. There are just 17 listings in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, including three for museum shows. Of the commercial galleries, four are in Bergamont Station. These are the Peter Feterman Gallery, RoseGallery, and Gallery Luisotti, which deal entirely in photography, and the Craig Krull Gallery, which specializes in photography, but shows works in other media as well.

Craig Krull was in his gallery space in Bergamont Station when the complex opened in 1994. Mr. Krull has observed the photography scene in Los Angeles for several decades, and represents many important area photographers. He has a keen sense of the history of photography and first hand knowledge of the ambitions of its local practitioners. He said the reason he sells artworks other than photography is that he is "interested in the uses of photography in the context of other arts."

In Los Angeles, photography is not considered a discrete art, but is simply one option of many available to artists. Painters take pictures, photographers paint, and many artists incorporate photography as one part of multimedia efforts. There are many places to study photography in L.A. — including UCLA, the University of Southern California, California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), and the Art Center College of Design — but they all teach photography in relationship with other arts. There are no dedicated schools of photography, such as the one at the International Center of Photography in New York.

When I asked Mr. Krull what he thought were the differences between photography in Los Angeles and New York, he said he thought a more apt contrast was with the Group f/64 in the San Francisco Bay Area. Up the California coast, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Willard Van Dyke set a standard of clear-eyed Straight Photography — a very formal aesthetic. In Los Angeles, things were more freewheeling, demotic, conceptual: simultaneously chaotic and spiritual. When asked if there was a

tradition of street photographers in Los Angeles comparable to the grand tradition of New York City street photographers, Mr. Krull told me about Robbert Flick.

Mr. Flick (b. 1939 in Amersfoort, Holland) began his career in Los Angeles in the 1960s taking more or less generic street photographs, but presented them arranged in grids made up of 100 or more shots. He then realized that Angelenos ordinarily experience the city from their automobiles, so he attached a camera to the roof of his car and shot as he drove slowly along. Mr. Flick's recent project on Pico Boulevard, a major street that runs between downtown Los Angeles and Santa Monica, incorporates thousands of individual color images mounted in huge grids that can be read as a text.

"Pico Boulevard" is certainly street photography, but it is totally alien to the intentions of Helen Levitt, Garry Winogrand, or William Klein: They are called "street photographers," but their real subject is pedestrians and the drama of urban encounter. For Mr. Flick, it is the miles of structures lining the road that are of interest. He is a professor of fine arts at the University of Southern California, and a major influence on the region's photography in the direction of conceptual art.

I told Mr. Krull that when I asked Weston Naef, a highly respected curator of photography at the J. Paul Getty Museum, what he thought was the main difference between photography in Los Angeles and New York, he said both cities have a great respect for the power of photographs to move people, but New York is the country's center for advertising, and so a lot of its photography is about selling goods. Los Angeles is the center for movies, and although stars achieve recognition in their films, they rely on still photographs to maintain their celebrity. Mr. Krull immediately said, "Absolutely!"

Mr. Krull gave as an example the vogue in the 1960s for Los Angeles artists to put a photograph of themselves, rather than an image of their work, on invitations to exhibition openings. Celebrity photography was important not just to specialists like George Platt Lynes, but also to eccentric and bohemian artists such as Edmund Teske (1911–1996). Teske was born in Chicago, and moved to Los Angeles in 1943. He studied Vedantic Hinduism and developed artsy techniques he called "composite printing" and "duotone solarization." But Teske, too, was interested in celebrity photos.

Teske's portrait of avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger has him posed heroically at Topanga Canyon with his image superimposed on a Gustave Dore print of the rebel angels from Milton's "Paradise Lost." Teske's picture of Jim Morrison shows his band, the Doors, gathered around him with El Greco's "Last Supper" printed above: Morrison and Christ are surrounded by their disciples. Teske had a considerable impact on later L.A. photographers, including James Fee and Jo-Ann Callis, with his experimental techniques and spiritualism.

Mr. Krull said "the important thing to get about Los Angeles becoming a major world art center, is that it is always in a state of becoming." There is, he said, a "wild sense of freedom," with less concern for tradition, and where anything goes. The project, as they say in Hollywood, is in development.

Source: www.nysun.com