

# THE BALTIMORE SUN

## Photographs are again in the picture

By Glenn McNatt | FEB. 26, 2002

A recent trip to New York suggests that the contemporary art world is in love with photographs, whether they're scanned from a computer, painted with a brush or made the old-fashioned way with a camera. Mine was admittedly a hurried sample - a couple of big museum exhibits, plus the annual Armory Show, also known as the International Fair of New Art, and a smattering of galleries. But I couldn't help noticing the ubiquity of photographic imagery in the most ambitious venues.

The Museum of Modern Art, for instance, is mounting a major retrospective of the German-born painter Gerhard Richter, whose work alternates between abstract expressionist-style gestural painting and figurative canvases based on photographs.

Richter, an elusive figure who resists artistic and ideological certainties, seems intent on proving he can do both the ab-ex painterly thing and the pop-inspired photo thing with equal aplomb. Yet Richter's paintings from photographs - news pictures, family snapshots, even school graduation portraits - are emotionally so compelling that it's likely he will be remembered far more for them than for his pure abstractions.

Over at Piers 88 and 90 on the Hudson River, the International Fair of New Art was chockablock with photography from all over the world, much of it consisting of large, glossy color prints of the sort that would have been dismissed as mere commercial or advertising art 20 years ago. That such pictures are being accepted today as serious artworks is a measure of the pervasive influence photography has exerted on contemporary art across the board.

At Pier 88 I also ran into Martha Macks, owner of Baltimore's Goya Girl Press, which turned out to be one of only a handful of non-New York-based, U.S. galleries in the show.

Goya Girl, which represents such Baltimore-based artists as Joyce Scott, Luis Flores, Timothy App, Jo Smail and Howie Lee Weiss, seemed right at home alongside galleries from Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, London and Vienna as well as the big contingent from New York.

In addition to her Baltimore artists, Macks also was showing works on paper by Liliana Porter, Christian Marclay, Mark Strand, Louisa Chase and Madeleine Keesing, whose large-scale abstract paintings recently were the subject of a one-woman show at Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art.

The growing importance of photography in contemporary art probably has benefited small galleries like Goya Girl by raising the profile of all works on paper, which traditionally were considered less important than oil paintings and sculpture. Goya Girl is a printmaking workshop staffed by master printers who work directly with the artists the gallery represents.

Finally, in a sort of backhanded acknowledgement of the contemporary fascination with camera images, the big draw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a show of 17th-century Baroque paintings by Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, the father and daughter team who became two of Caravaggio's most gifted followers.

The Gentileschis painted big, colorful, intensely dramatic scenes based on biblical and historical subjects in a style that anticipated photographic realism 200 years before the invention of photography.

As with so many of the Italian Baroque masters after Caravaggio, one gets the feeling that if the camera had been available to them they would happily have transferred their visions into Technicolor movies a la Cecil B. DeMille rather than oil on canvas.

Towson shows Kahn works

Closer to home, the pervasive influence of photography on contemporary art is evident in the lovely show at Towson University's fine exhibit of paintings by Tobi Kahn at the Holtzman Gallery in the fine arts building.

Kahn, a New York-based artist who began his career in the 1970s, paints delicately balanced abstractions derived from landscape in much the same way that natural forms provided the starting point for such earlier artists as Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko.

But where Still and Rothko's abstract-expressionist canvases seemed like inspired variations on the artists' direct observation of nature, Kahn's paintings suggest nature as seen through the camera's lens. Many pictures recall the vertical perspective of overhead satellite photography, in which geological forms - land masses, mountains and rivers - seem to emerge in the repetitive patterns of fractal geometry.

At the other end of the scale, Kahn's paintings are reminiscent of photos taken through a microscope, of cell tissues and other biological specimens that have been enlarged hundreds of times to reveal organic forms that seem to recur on every scale of existence, from the motions of subatomic particles to distant clusters of galaxies millions of light years across.

This is a fascinating show of unusually high quality for a college venue, so it's well worth a trip to the Towson campus. The exhibit runs through March 17.