



Barbara Probst, *Exposure #46*,
N.Y.C., 555 8th Avenue,
10.09.06, 8:23 pm.

The decisive moments

Barbara Probst makes
our heads spin at MoCP.

By Philip Berger

Among the arts, photography has probably spawned the most hackneyed array of clichés: a picture is worth a thousand words, a photo freezes a moment in time, the camera never lies. “Exposures,” an exhibition of Barbara Probst’s work at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, subverts several notions about photography, among other things. Probst, who was born in Germany in 1964 but has lived and worked in New York since 1999, presents work that speaks to Big Issues like Time, Space and Reality.

Although Probst is a photographer, it’s probably wrong to consider her work simple photography; it’s much more in the arena of conceptualism. Conceptual art is a genre that even sophisticated observers can find puzzling or frustrating, because a lot of it begs to be explained, and you can’t help but question the effectiveness of art that doesn’t stand on its own without a wall text. While anything presented as art is open to multiple interpretations, it’s a natural inclination to try to figure out what the artist intended: To tell a story? To document an event? To make a statement about politics or religion or human relationships or the nature of art itself?

Probst’s work presents no such barriers. The fundamental principle—presenting different views of the same place or event at the same

moment—is easily readable; the two-paneled *Exposure #39* (the pieces are all numbered rather than titled) makes it succinctly. In a color image, we see a young woman who seems to be power walking in a picturesque Alpine setting. The second image, in black and white, is shot from above, and we see a photographer taking the photo of the young woman on a New York rooftop; the pastoral scene behind her is a photographic backdrop. MoCP curator Karen Irvine says this is only the basic point of Probst’s works: “They unsettle our faith in the idea of any sort of photographic truth,” and reveal photography’s “capacity to tell stories and our propensity to believe them.”

Probst is as much a choreographer as anything else.

Once you get the idea, it offers enormous complexities and complications, and the pieces with more panels (some *Exposures* have as many as 12) start to make your head spin.

In *Exposure #36*, the first image is of a woman from the waist up, in a fenced yard. A reverse angle, shot from below and behind her, reveals the location is a photo studio—the fenced yard is obviously a backdrop. Another shot, taken from the side, shows only the woman’s upraised arms, but reveals a different backdrop on the other wall, showing another photographer taking a picture of someone else on a city street.

A fourth picture is a close-up of the woman’s face, and only in the fifth, taken from above, do we realize the existence of both backdrops—but also, in the right corner of the picture, the arm and head of another person evidently lying on the floor.

Irvine says that Probst is as much a choreographer as anything else. Her tableaux are carefully orchestrated, and her technique for getting multiple perspectives involves an elaborate system of radio-wave transmissions that simultaneously set off each strategically placed camera on the scene. Sometimes the cameras are held by characters in the photos, at other times you see them mounted on tripods, and in other instances they’re not visible at all.

Although trained as a sculptor, Probst says she just sort of fell into photography because it enabled her to explore the issues that interested her. “I don’t see myself so much as a photographer, but I need to photograph to do that work,” she says.

Even if she isn’t strictly a photographer, her work is very much about photography. The subject matter of the various scenes is often taken from stock photographic genres: fashion, glamour, family snapshots, spot news, crime-scene forensics, all of which adds to its universality. Probst says she’s happiest “when the viewer gets into it and tries to find out where his or her viewpoint is.”

“Barbara Probst: *Exposures*” is at the Museum of Contemporary Photography through June 2. See *Museums & Institutions*.

Reviews

Carrie Gundersdorf

★★★★★

Shane Campbell Gallery (see West Side), through Sat 5.

The abstract paintings and drawings in Carrie Gundersdorf’s exhibition, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” are grounded in space. With titles like *Star Trails-58 Minutes* and *Two Widths of the Epsilon Ring-violet & navy version*, our thoughts turn not just to the heavens, but to the technology that observes it. The relationship between art and science is tenuous, yet a common platform for many abstractionists today is to aestheticize science. This can be problematic; it’s as if pure abstraction were not enough on its own and artists feel the need to justify themselves through references to string theory. While in danger of this, Gundersdorf’s work escapes the trap. The strongest piece is *Two Widths*, a simple graphic composition of two parallelograms side by side (presumably the two scans of Uranus’ Epsilon Ring). The painting works because instead of an astronomy lesson, it feels like an invitation to think of the fantastic qualities of space. *Space* means a lot of things here. There’s pictorial space—the way the dark background recedes and the light foreground advances. When this happens within a nonrepresentational image, it’s called abstract space. Our understanding of outer space operates the way abstract space does—purely through our mental picture of the idea of *space*, like an illustration in a geometry book. In Gundersdorf’s paintings, all these forms of space are present, making for a unique body of work.—Erik Wenzel

Two Widths of the Epsilon Ring-violet & navy version, 2007.

