The Conscience of Collections

By Ben Lifson

LOVE IS BLIND. Castelli Photographs, 4 East 77th Street, 288-3202; through July 31.

NEW PHOTOGRAPHS. Robert Freidus Gallery, 158 Lafayette Street, 925-0113; through July 31.

PORTRAITS. Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery, 825 Madison Avenue, at 69th Street, 737-2055; through July 31.

GROUP SHOW Daniel Wolf, 30 West 57th Street, 586-8432; through August 9.

Ideally, the galleries' summer generosity toward untried photographers also benefits the audience. While young artists get pressure-free exhibition we get a sense of developing talents and trends, and a chance to appreciate more than judge. In most galleries this isn't the case.

Daniel Wolf has invited too many photographers. With limited space, this refusal to discriminate gives the artists short shrift, and gives us little sense of individual or collective aims. Castelli Photographs' "Love is Blind" is organized to showcase the gallery director rather than the photographers; it too is overcrowded and slapdash. The content of the show is snide: all love is desperate, doomed, and—because it occurs mostly among the lower classes—dull. As for photographs of love (quite a different genre from love photographs), Castelli would have us believe that they too are equal. In this case, such an anti-intellectual affectation is genuinely naive; on these walls, there are indeed no distinctions between bad movie stills and bad art photographs, between the front pages of the *Post* and new wave schlock. And at Marcuse Pfeifer's summer portrait show, we discover that many young photographers don't know what a portrait is.

Even in these circumstances, gallery-going can still be rewarding. Without the usual keys to an exhibition's meanings—a known artist's record; a theme; a trend; a concept—we are simply challenged by a lot of pictures. Art without pedigrees or labels forces us to reiterate (if not to redefine or restructure) our working assumptions; to get back to the basics, which the politics, history, anger, surprise, glamor, discovery, and theory of the regular season often overwhelm.

At the very least, from photographers we expect photography—serious contention with the medium's constraints and conventions. We get it this summer from Toba Tucker (Pfeifer Gallery). Her portraits of inmates at the Daytop Village Rehabilitation Center reduce the portrait to its elements: the subject, bare space, plain light. Drawing, observation, and a split-second's decision about what creates character count most in this situation. Tucker has faith in these spartan means, and in her subjects' capacities to be interesting. In beginning work, such restraint, such faith in description, such respect for tradition, are welcome, and suggest a talent strong enough to wrestle with this ungiving medium.

Tom Roma (at Daniel Wolf) gives us the aspect of the artist's self which can be discovered in his risks. Roma's Brooklyn streets are the well-travelled, run down, semi-suburban roads of much recent American photography. Roma looks at them freshly. Without the irony or bitterness previously connected with this territory, he finds sweet bravery in grape vines and in kids in cut-offs and sneakers. He

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also describes these neighborhoods—where harsh, crisp tones once prevailed—with a softness and a sense of light which is almost pictorialist. These are tentative departures, not triumphs of lyricism; still, they outline the emotional truth Roma seeks.

Spontaneous, grateful response to simple, incontestable beauty is hard to express. Serge Hambourg (also at Wolf) has steered with necessary precision between dull literalism and gratuitous exaggeration to give us a beautiful picture of a beautiful tree in Provence. Hambourg's style is plain and direct; the subdivisions of his print are as bold as the tree's thrust toward the sky, or as its prominence, a single upright shape in the low lying landscape. But at the low horizon of the print, in the extreme distance of the scene, subtle relationships among gaps in trees and slopes of hills point to Hambourg's complex organizations within the major sections of his print, and thus to the difference between his picture and the tree. In the slight bend of a road, in the brilliantly jagged line where

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the edges of the tree meet the sky, lies a complicated, delicate sense of visual counterpoint to the stark drama of the tree itself and its position in the frame, against the sky's blue field. And this compositional skill gives us Hambourg's response: a fine balance between frank acceptance and aggressive reification of beauty.

Leo Rubinfien's picture of family goodbyes in a Tokyo railroad station (Castelli Photographs) extracts profound psychological meaning from a banal ceremony. A boy of eight or ten years stands on a platform, facing the train; his mother bends over and looks down at him while from within the train his grandmother stares fixedly at him. Although the boy's back is to us, he is the hero of this picture, because he is the object of everyone's gaze: his father's and younger brother's respectful observation from the shadows to his left; his mother's tender, consoling attention; and his grandmother's inexhaustible, immoveable regard. The urgency of her look and his almost imperceptible sadness (in the fall of his shoulders), tell us that the dusty glass and glinting light through which her eyes search for him are acknowledged foreshadowings of her inevitable death. As the anarchic light and shadows of covered or subterranean railroad stations almost obliterate the boy's father and brother, we understand this scene as the boy's simultaneous recognition and loss of the value of nurturing female love. And as these same shadows and lights make up part of the picture's chromatic (as well as tonal) structure, we understand from their inky blues, dusty yellows, silvery browns, and orange tans of cloth, skin, and metal—hues which are not so much mechanical and artificial as mediated by consciousness—that this picture is less an observation than a memory, and not only Rubinfien's. This photograph has structured and transmuted vision so that all of us can experience the fragmentary, intensity of our most significant and irrepressible childhood recollections—the closest most of us come to the numinous. (Like Hambourg's tree, Rubinfien's family group has the added distinction of being one of the few color photographs on exhibit this summer which cannot be translated into a black and white reproduction here.)

Robert Friedus Gallery is one of the few galleries to take the idea of the summer show seriously. Five newcomers have been welcomed, given ample space and professional presentation. If they don't overwhelm us, it's partly because they don't pretend to. Geoffrey Biddle, Jim Dow, Brian Fanczyk, Stephen Myers, and David M. Stephenson are simply intent on making solid, strong photographs within traditional types: genre studies, interiors, semi-abstract studies of urban streets and walls, semi-documentary studies of upstate rural communities, and large black and white southwestern landscapes, respectively. All five know their conventions well, have good powers of observation and description, excellent craftsmanship and good taste, which to a photographer means an appreciation of the best example of a type of object, house, configuration of land, etc. In Biddle's acute sense of the telling gesture, or Myers's peculiarly remote distance from his subject matter, moreover, there are flashes of sensibility. All five will bear closer watching when they next show. ■