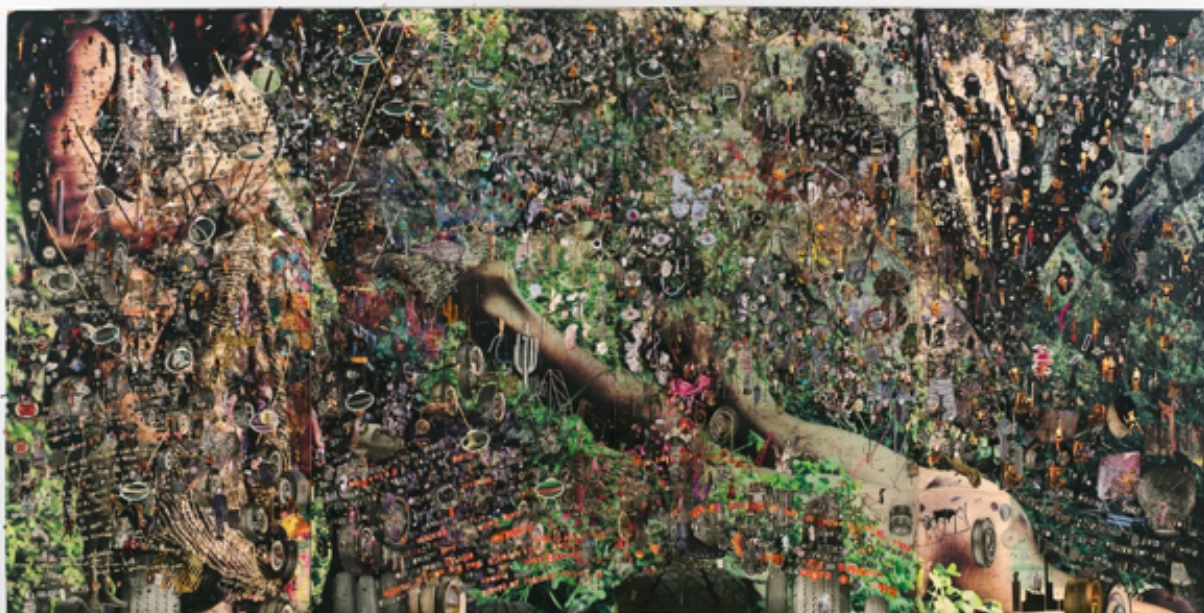# What's Real Today (Check Again Soon)

May 16, 2013

Art Review

Elliott Hundley's 2010 mural-size "Pentheus," a collage incorporating digital photographs and inkjet prints, in "A Different Kind of Order."Courtesy Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Digital makes, and the art world takes. That's reality today. So "A Different Kind of Order," the title of the International Center of Photography's fourth triennial, and its best yet, is apt.

In 2003, when the triennial was new, digital photography was a trend in search of credibility, and the Internet merely an optional image source. A decade later, photography is largely dependent on the Internet. Pixelated images flow through the world unstanched. The triennial, organized by

four of the center's curators — Joanna Lehan, Kristen Lubben, Christopher Phillips and Carol Squiers — is what new-work surveys strive to be but seldom are: about art precisely now.

A Different Kind of Order Thomas Hirschhorn's video "Touching Reality," via iPad, at the International Center of Photography.Courtesy the artist; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Well over half the artists in it use digital technology in their work or mimic its properties. For the youngest participants, born in the 1980s, the mash-up mentality of the Photoshop era is clearly second nature, as they nonchalantly mix photography with painting, sculpture, video, whatever.

Maybe most noticeable is the role of the visual information glut: Some artists embrace it, take what they find, culling and editing; others retreat into overdrive versions of object making, inflected with digital thinking. Either way, a sense of connectivity with a networked world comes through. Global political realities seep through the show like a spreading

stain, sometimes apparent, sometimes not.

In certain work those realities are embodied in old-fashioned analog format. The South African-born photographer Gideon Mendel spent the early part of his career documenting racial strife in his homeland. (He was a major figure in the center's "Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life" last year.) Recently, he has focused on potentially catastrophic climate change, evidenced in increased flooding worldwide. Flooding is particularly destructive to countries too poor to prevent or quickly recover from it. In his "Drowning World" series we see people in Africa, India and Southeast Asia forced to lead amphibious lives knee-deep and shoulder-deep in water that refuses to recede.

Hito Steyerl telling a friend's story with pictures taken on an iPhone.Ray Anastas and Leon Kahane, Courtesy the artist

In photographs by other artists, disaster is more opaque. Try to find the hovering drone in a skyscape by Trevor Paglen. Mite-size, it's hard to see, but it's there. And what appear to be fields of stars in pictures by Shimpei Takeda are in reality quite earthbound. To make them, this young photographer placed soil samples gathered near Fukushima, Japan, the site of the 2011 nuclear disaster and 40 miles from where he was born, on sheets of photosensitive film. The constellationlike forms that emerged, without the use of a camera, are traces of radiation soaked into the earth.

By contrast, there is no mistaking the content of the short 2012 video "Touching Reality," by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn. Shown in a space of its own, the piece consists entirely of images of terribly ruined human bodies, the casualties of wars and rebellions around the globe. The pictures, mostly anonymous cellphone shots, are of a kind routinely rejected by the news media as too gruesome to print. But all are available on the Internet, and in Mr. Hirschhorn's video we see a succession of

them being scrolled across an iPad screen.

The scrolling hand, apparently female, moves quickly, but now and then stops to enlarge a detail of a blown-away face, or blank, dead eye, or detached limb. The pauses feel all but unwatchable. Mr. Hirschhorn has incorporated similar images in sculptural installations, but nothing he's done is as gut-level powerful as this. The video lasts only about five minutes, but if you take it all in, the effect is almost neurological: You walk away, and the environment around you feels changed, distanced and disordered.

Rabih Mroué's "Blow Up 3."Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg

Disorder and distortion are built into this show, which includes a good amount of work that is either shaped by digital methods of editing, morphing and remixing, or uses cut-and-paste collage techniques to get the same shape-shifting results.

The Kenyan-born Wangechi Mutu invents a species of splendidly monstrous hybrid beings using clips from anatomy manuals and pornography. Walid Raad, a native of Beirut, photographically blends Islamic and non-Islamic art objects to create a new transcultural, interfaith species of art.

The New York artist Nayland Blake offers a visual disquisition, through a display of archival objects, on the changing look of gay identity since the 1960s. (He will take a look of his own invention out onto the streets of Times Square in June in a series of performances.) Finally, Hito Steyerl, a conceptual artist based in Berlin, interweaves images from her past and present in effort to reconstruct the mysterious life of a dead friend, doing much of her investigative work through pictures taken on an iPhone.

A detail of Sohei Nishino's "New York."Michael Hoppen Gallery, London

A very specific digital application underlies the work of Mishka Henner, a

Belgian artist living in England. His aerial views of Dutch landscapes are interrupted by what look like patches of Modernist abstraction, though he didn't insert them in the pictures; the Dutch government did to hide military sites. As for Mr. Henner's contribution, he simply downloaded the photos, already altered, from Google Earth. And in what could be taken as a hands-on, labor-intensive simulation of Google Earth omniscience, the Japanese artist Sohei Nishino constructs giant maps of major cities — New York, Jerusalem — by puzzling together thousands of fragments of on-location photographs that he shoots while walking those cities, block by block.

Is one view, analog or digital, "realer" than the other? All image making, and in particular photography, with its conflicted reputation for factuality and falsification, raises issues about authenticity. What are we looking at in an image? Is it what it appears to be? If it's artifice — and photographs and digital images, like paintings, are basically artificial — why should we care about it, invest belief in it? Such questions are always implicit, but this show asks them, straight out, time and again.

A remarkable video by the Austrian artist Oliver Laric is almost entirely about the unreliability of visual truth, particularly in the digital realm, where anything and everything can be invented. As an example, Mr. Laric points to photographs released on the Internet in 2008 by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, purporting to show four missiles built in Iran and capable of attacking Israel. The pictures, however, had been inexpertly faked, and soon comically exaggerated versions of them, with dozens of missiles, proliferated online. Yet at least briefly, when they first appeared, the pictures did what they were meant to do: cause fear.

Shimpei Takeda's "Trace #7, Nihonmatsu Castle."Courtesy the artist

More recently, the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué, spurred by the blackout in media coverage of Syria's murderous civil war, starting collecting Internet images posted by civilians trapped in the conflict. Among them

he found videos of soldiers pointing guns directly toward people taking photographs, and of cameras abruptly falling to the ground.

The surviving images are assumed to have been retrieved from the cellphones of people killed while photographing, which makes them poignant relics, and Mr. Mroué dramatizes them by blowing up the images of the gunmen. At the same time, in video, he admits that what appear to be fatal encounters might have been staged for Internet consumption, like scenes from action films. Digital photography makes this possible, but we'll probably never know what really happened.

Staged for sure is one of the show's formal pièces de résistance, Elliott Hundley's 2010 mural-size "Pentheus." An immense collage incorporating digital photographs and inkjet prints, it's based on Euripides' play "The Bacchae," a very 21st-century tale of revenge, violence and twisted faith. Mr. Hundley, who was born in 1975 and lives in Los Angeles, makes a fantastically entertaining thing of it, with dense, mossy patterns of words and images pasted on a solid ground, and more images, tiny ones, projected from the surface on long pins.

The result has the textural complexity of painting, the depth in relief of sculpture and the data overload of the digital environment. All that, and it also tells a moral story about the confusion of fact and fiction, truth and lies, and the grave consequences such confusions can, and do, have. Like any genuinely adult art, it speaks equally to mind and eye, as does this up-to-the-minute status report of a show.