

art

SHARP SHOTS

Innovative and traditional black-and-white photography holds its own in a new Mpls Photo Center show.

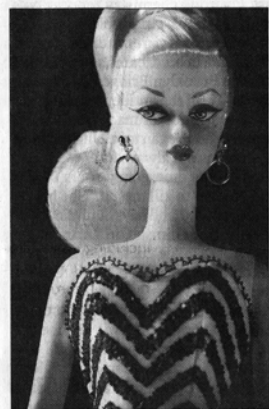
ART REVIEW MARY ABBE



With sizzling color photos available at the touch of a digital button, the decision to shoot or to print in black-and-white is curious. And yet, as a new show at the Mpls Photo Center proves, photographers worldwide persist in doing it. The show features 69 black-and-white photos by 69 photographers chosen by Boston-based curator George Slade from more than 1,900 images submitted electronically.

The exhibit, which runs through Oct. 25, pays homage to a tradition that "has always modeled the essence of photography," the center claims. Dominant throughout the 20th century, that tradition is now imperiled by changing technology and attitudes.

Crisp black-and-white images became the 20th century's gallery standard in part because high-quality silver gelatin papers were commercially available, allowing photographers to maximize the tonal range and depth of their prints. By making a fetish of printing, photographers argued for the artistic merit of photography by insisting that darkroom wizardry made their images the aesthetic equal of paintings or sculptures.



"Debut Barbie," by Nicole Houff

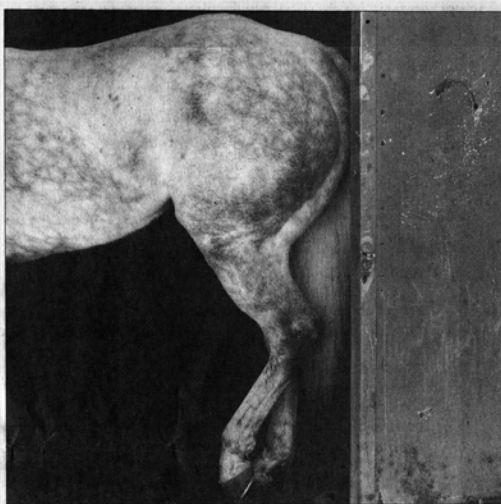
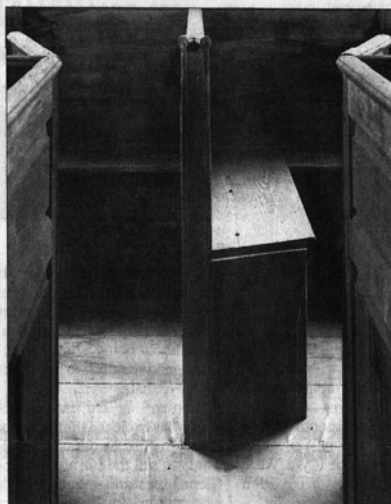
A chance to compare

Trends aside, the MPC show celebrates the persistence of monochrome pictures, offering a big-tent welcome to myriad subjects and talents. Its chief virtue, however, is the opportunity it provides to compare prints and to evaluate their distinctive qualities — the way certain chemical toners (especially selenium) can enrich clarity and luminescence, how the choice of matte or gloss paper affects the mood of a picture, whether a sloppy print job diminishes a composition or effectively lends it calculated casualness. The stand-out images here are traditionally processed, but skilled practitioners get great stuff from new technologies, too, including monochrome digital and inkjet prints.

The best of the photos are true to the mid-20th-century aesthetic of rich, deep tones, darkroom-printed with fastidious attention to nuance. See especially Will Agar's "Con Agra Interior," a selenium-toned still-life of graffiti on concrete stairs and broken windows in an abandoned warehouse. From that unpromising subject, Agar has made a luminous composition that



Above, "Con Agra Interior," Will Agar. Below left, "Pew Bench, Rocky Hill Meeting House," Paul Wainwright; right, "Resting," Ellen Rennard.



expertly balances the varied tones and textures of bricks, frosted glass, sprayed paint and inky lines. Likewise, Paul Wainwright's image of a narrow, unadorned wooden pew in a 1785 Massachusetts meetinghouse is a contemplative marvel. He also used selenium to enrich the image, which is printed on a more porous, matte paper than Agar's. The composition is really nothing more than a precise arrangement of light and dark angles and planes that visually advance and recede in space, but its spare clarity seems to embody the essence of the lives that once prayed there.

By comparison Jacquelin Bickerstaff's picture of a rumbled bed, which hangs nearby, is a dramatic composition whose inkjet printing results in a disappointingly thin and unrewarding image. It has a lot going for it as a composition — odd angles, blaring lights, deep shadows, a certain crime-scene harshness accentuated by bleaching light. Given a more sensitive and subtle printing, it might have Hitchcock-like mystery. Likewise, Joe Zaremba's "Playing for Life" is a memorable composition of a man proudly blowing a penny whis-

BLACK, WHITE AND ALL POINTS IN BETWEEN

What: 69 black-and-white photos by 69 photographers.

When: 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 10 a.m.-noon Sat., noon-8 p.m. Sun. Ends Oct. 25.

Where: Mpls Photo Center, 2400 N. 2nd St., Mpls.

Review: Images vary in subject and interest but afford an excellent opportunity to compare the virtues of traditional silver prints with contemporary inkjet images.

Tickets: Free. 612-643-3511 or www.mplsphotocenter.com.

tle that could be even stronger if printed in silver rather than ink.

Still, the inkjet medium has its stars, particularly Dan Madden, who gets a lot out of a gleaming whitewall tire of a Rolls-Royce and the silvery shadows of its surrounding fenders, and Samuel Moulin, whose multiple exposure of torso, wall and tree images is printed with care and subtlety on a special fiber paper.

In the end the show's strength is the attention it brings to great images regardless of technique. Among them are David Bowman's crystalline shot of dingo traps dangling in an Australian landscape; Petronella Ytsma's harrowing portrait of a Vietnamese teenager, a hideously maimed victim of Agent Orange, in his mother's arms; the silvery velvet flank of a horse that Ellen Rennard contrasts with a scratched metal door; and the Hollywood lighting with which Nicole Houff accentuates the calculating charms of "Debut Barbie" in a close-up of the plastic coquette.

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