

Ellen Friedlander: the street, the dream, the break, the flow

The modern/postmodern era, a time of tremendous evolution and upheaval, has as its dominant tonality an aesthetic of urbanism, disruption, and irreality. Some have called this inflection a “collage aesthetic,” in which fragments of experience abut other fragments. To be sure, discontinuity prevails. Even as we cultivate change and innovation, we struggle to make sense – if not logic, then some form of coherent sequence – of the discordant world we have created for ourselves. We dream accordingly, leaping over time and space in cascades of symbols, citations, and non sequiturs. And our waking existence recapitulates such fracture. Our lives are more than ever our own and yet more controlled and manipulated by outside forces, ultimately broken and put back together with the cracks showing.

For a century and a half modern/postmodern art has manifested this disjunct existence, and one of the principle factors in the shattering of the mirror art holds to life has been photography. Where once we regarded the camera as an instrument of veristic re-presentation, unifying and somehow taming the wider world, now we understand it as a segmenting, de-centering force, defying time and space, freezing moments into experiential shards. “Straight” photography, which lies to us even while providing unimpeachable evidence, renders reality no less brittle and opaque than does manipulated photography; the digital era’s myriad means of manipulation – and, indeed, of documentation – do not reinvent the camera’s perceptual subversions, only amplify them.

Ellen Friedlander brings a timely appetite for discontinuity to her camerawork – or, more precisely, she brings a dynamic of continuity within discontinuity, and vice versa, to her approach(es) to photographic production. The variety in that production itself attests to Friedlander’s commitment to a multiple point of view: at one turn she is a portrait photographer, at another an abstractor of the human body, at yet another a composer of urban montage, at still another a landscape photographer who subjects her views to conceptual superstructures. Her images are invariably clear and lucid, and color and chiaroscuro always work together to convey surface, depth of field, and temporal and seasonal atmosphere. There is something sensuous in every Friedlander frame.

But these are the givens of personal style. Friedlander is quite willing, and able, to apply these gifts and characteristics to a broad range of formats. None is her invention (and in that way she remains faithful to the parallel traditions of fine-art, popular, and commercial photography). But all are shaped to her artistic and programmatic needs. She has a story to tell, a scene to set, a figure to have pass, different moments or impressions of the earthly comedy, human and beyond. There is little if any sense of pose or artifice, even in the portraits or the extended self-examination “Betrayal”; Friedlander values the quality of spontaneity perhaps above all other qualities, maintaining the immediacy of the photographic image even while subjecting it to disorder and disjuncture. Indeed, the image’s vital presence in the present reifies the conditions of the collage aesthetic. Observation and reflection are simultaneous, and discontinuous.

Friedlander’s basic ongoing mode of image presentation is the standard individual picture, but she also makes use of the picture grid, a (seemingly) orderly arrangement of disparate but subjectively, and often tenuously, related shots. While any of the pictures Friedlander grids is ultimately to be blown up and shown as an autonomous print, its role as the second tile down and fifth over can be established a priori, giving it an arbitrary meaning in the “grammar” of the sequence. In grids the

pictures do not surrender enough of their identity to subsume entirely into the indexical nature of the format; oddly, though, the whole does not struggle to swallow its parts, providing them a context without imposing it.

Friedlander can present her “traditional” portraiture in a gridded fashion as well, inviting us in effect to consider the subject from a number of vantages – most of which determine not space so much as time. That is, the portrayed is seen basically from the same point of view but within that framework is in some kind of motion. This approach pays oblique homage to the masters of sequence photography, from Muybridge to Michals, without replicating the quirks and gimmicks that they tend(ed) to cultivate. Friedlander is as clever as any of them, but where they get elaborate, she stays demure.

The landscape series, for all their sensitivity to atmosphere and composition, are also more about time than about space. Whether they claim temporal urgency (as in “Pandemic”) or not (“Santa Rosalia”), they bridge the conceptual gap between short- and long-term documentation – effectively, between headline and feature, reportage and thought piece. Documentation is not Friedlander’s main point, however; the relationship of document (or, if you would, testament) to aesthetic image – of news to art – is. Friedlander’s photographs are art not by accident. In fact, they are more likely documents by accident, even as the artist maintains her task of celebrating the present.

Two sequences that transcend structural order resonate with a self-reflection and personal vulnerability not available (or appropriate) in the others. And it is in these series that Friedlander’s appreciation and engagement of the collage aesthetic is most clearly asserted. In “Extended Frame” the photographer herself notes that she is “visually creating a non-linear diary of spaces and places that have been imprinted on my psyche: examining the spatial disorientation that I encounter when traveling” – a perfect description of the collage experience increasingly common to daily life for at least the past hundred years. Friedlander describes the conditions set up in the “Extended Frame” montages as if they were dreamt or hallucinated: “This illusion of place is, in fact, visual confusion, but the consistency of elements in the photographs allows for the recognition that the scene could actually exist.” The collage aesthetic, then, mediates between the real and the imagined, the noted and the fabricated, and between and among time(s) and place(s). Much of Friedlander’s oeuvre derives from her global travels, but her images by and large avoid or at least skirt the picturesque. What interests her most is not the specific character of specific locales but the disorientation of being somewhere else – and, ultimately, the determination that everywhere, home not least, is somewhere else.

If “Extended Frame” recapitulates the alienation of displacement (including the physio-temporal displacement of jet lag), “Betrayal” exposes a deeper alienation, an at-once universal and unshareable discord that erupts from within upon discovery of trust sabotaged. While Friedlander’s other work builds itself on glances and incidents, on a collage of varied and circumstantial phenomena, “Betrayal” comprises a portfolio of physically – literally – collaged photos all of the same exact subject: the artist’s own body, naked, vulnerable, and clearly ravaged by a tortuous efflux of emotion. The cut or torn lines distort the body further. The fiercely embodied representation of anguish, impossible to mistake, serves as testament to the violence done to Friedlander’s psyche; but it does not lock the violence in the body, but releases it so that the artist’s corporeal self takes

over her perceived self – or vice versa. An agitated mind takes the form of an assaulted body, and that collaged body becomes an icon, not just a site, for the ravages of intimate treachery.

“Betrayal” is unusual in Friedlander’s work, given the inward turn of its gaze and its preoccupation with qualities of expression rather than of observation. Its reliance on physical rather than pictorial collage also heightens its manifestation of raw feeling; the rest of her oeuvre presupposes a displacement of rather than focus on tactile and somatic awareness. Yet, “Betrayal” is in many ways as characteristic of Friedlander’s art as anything she has done, not least in its visual reliance equally on keen visual (even documentary) sensibility and on the tectonic reformations the collage aesthetic visits on viewed and viewer alike. Ellen Friedlander’s world does not stop at the skin.

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