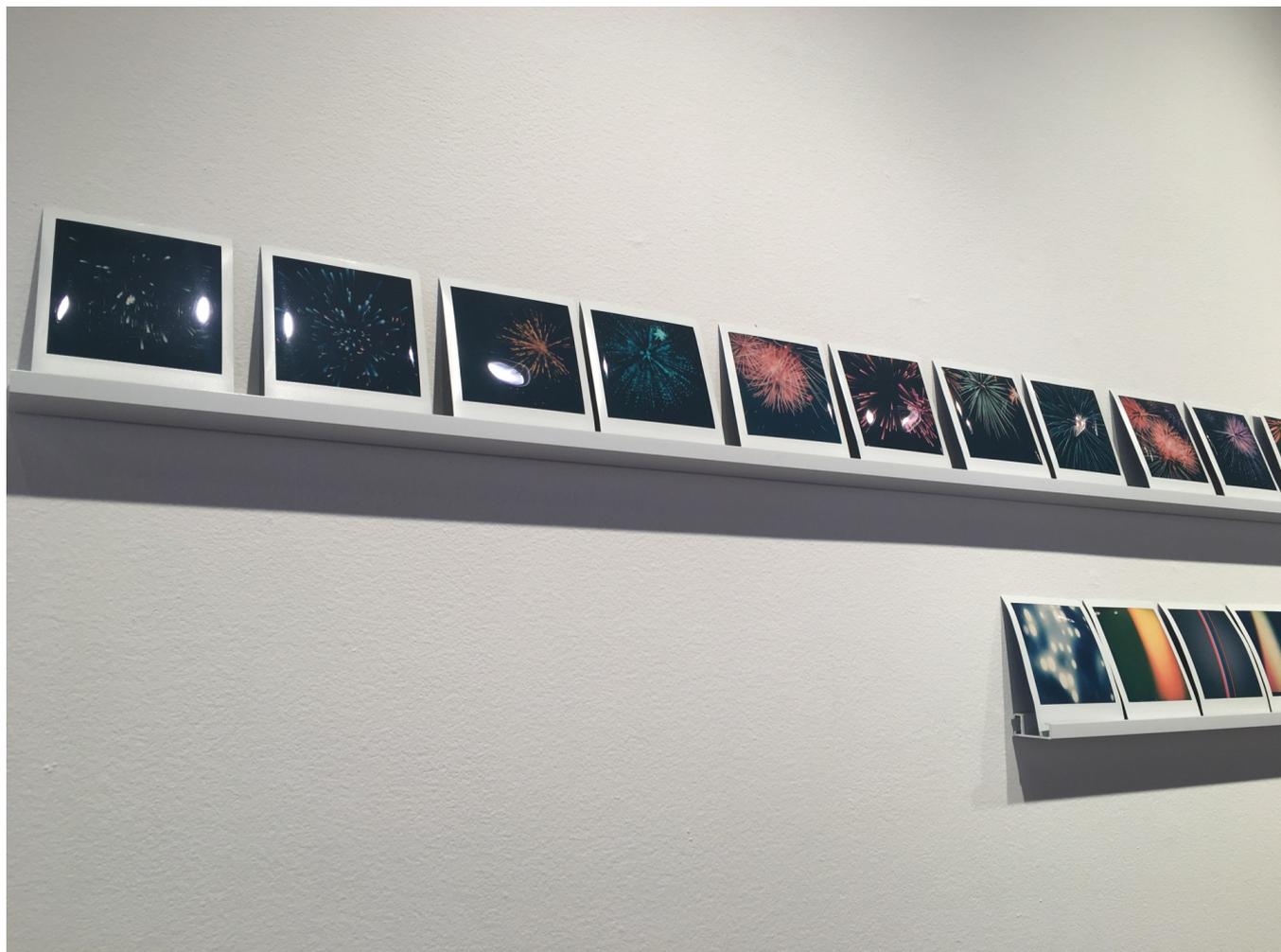


Will Photography Survive Its Art-Historical Karma?

[Will Meier](#) March 31, 2017



Penelope Umbrico's photos of photos of photos at David. B. Smith Gallery

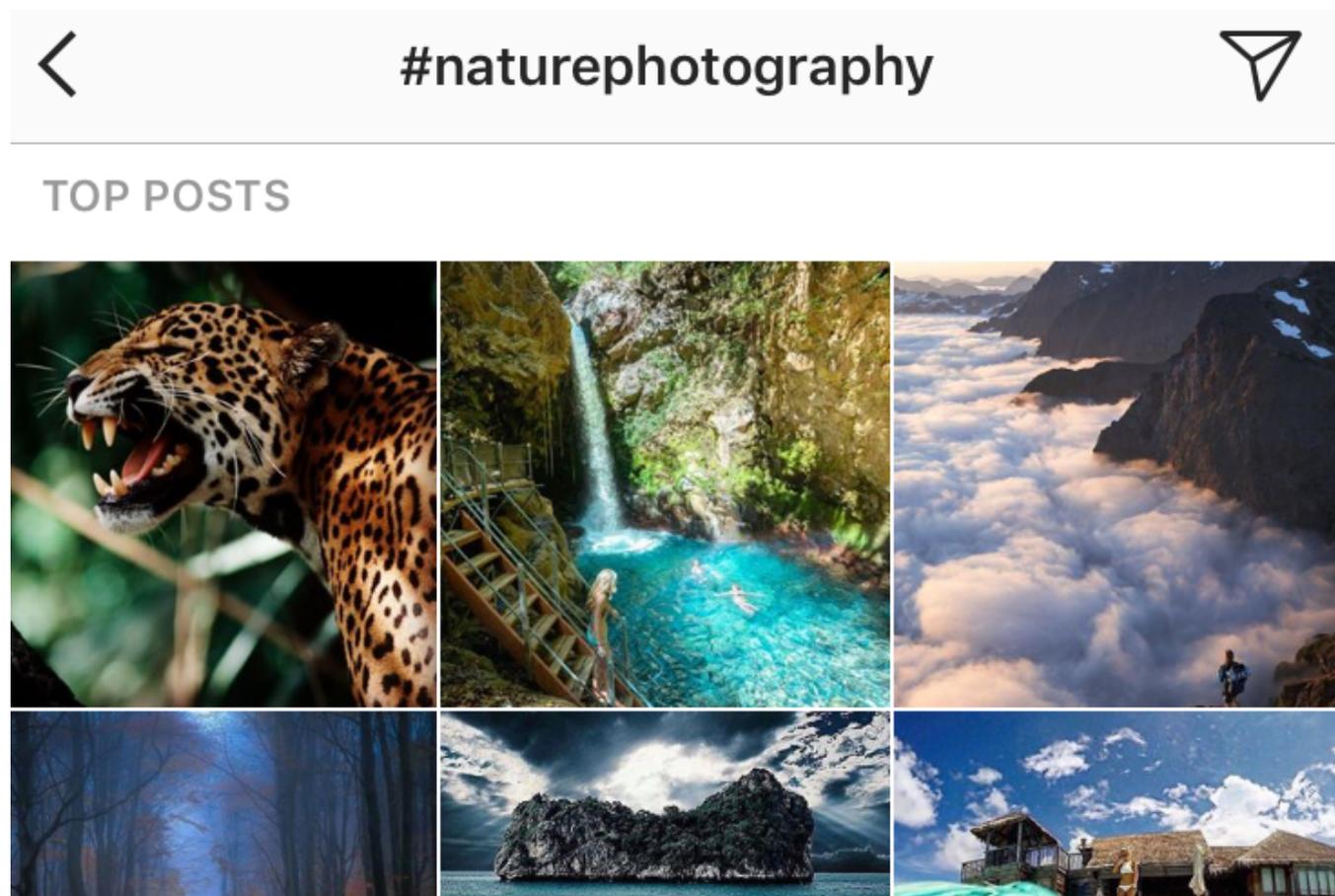
“I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was ‘in itself,’ by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images.”

– Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

Month of Photography is just about over, and again, it was a great set of shows, with a diverse array of aesthetics and concepts. But going around

and looking at these shows, I can't help but skew every single one of them with this train of thought, which was at the forefront of my mind even during the last MoP. What I'm talking about is this funny notion that like, what photography did to painting oh-so-many years ago, it's now suffering itself next to the infinite scrollability of the internet, and as a fine-art discipline is now sort of scampering in painting's footsteps, conceptually.

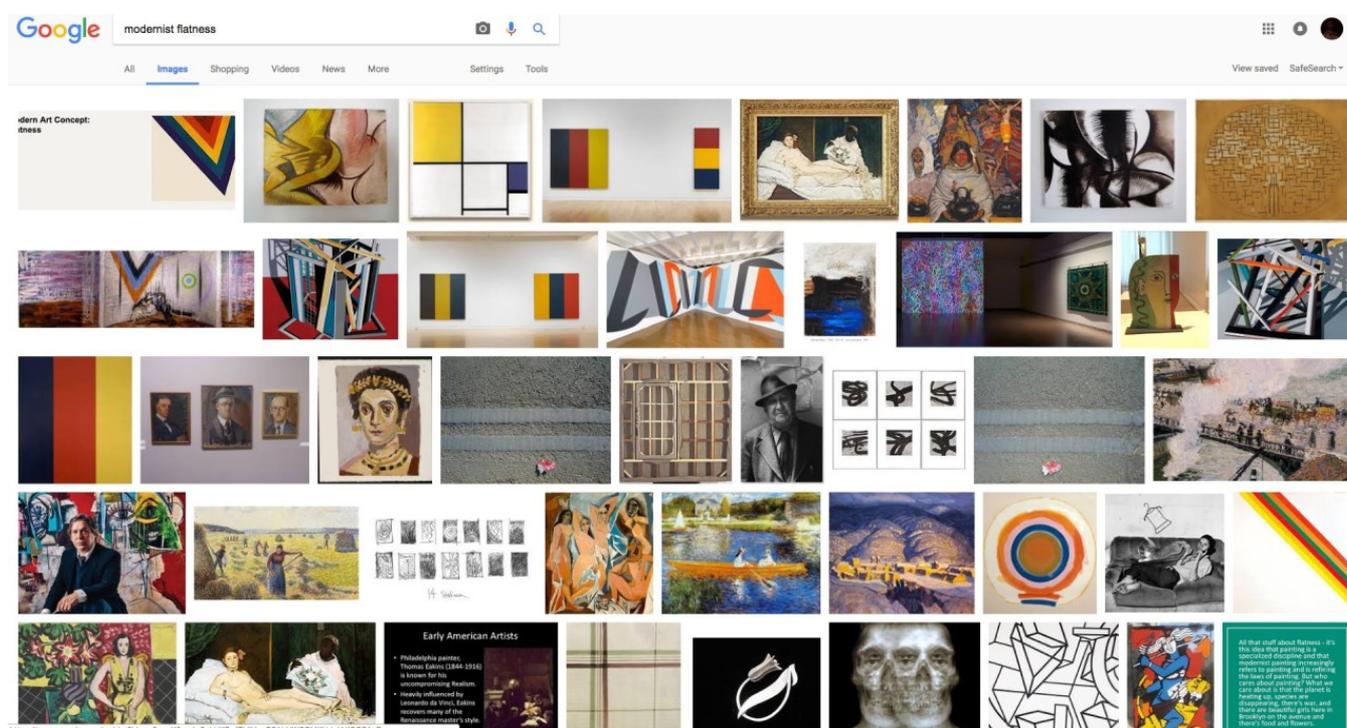
Okay, so what do I mean, exactly?



I remember a few years ago suddenly realizing, with everyone talking about how ISIS was using Instagram as their new principal recruitment vehicle, that this was the same Instagram that was in my pocket. Sure enough, a few copy-pasted arabic hashtags (who knows) later, and I was seeing the frontlines of the mythic War On Terror through the eyes of the enemy. Graphic Stuff. Not something many people would want to see, and yes, I definitely worried about the NSA liking my Facebook statuses in the future, but just pause and think about what I'm getting at here. If you can

have an experience that shockingly unique on Instagram, an experience also by most accounts not-at-all-Art, where does that leave Photography, the medium of imagery, in its fine-art gallery context? Where does it find meaning anymore?

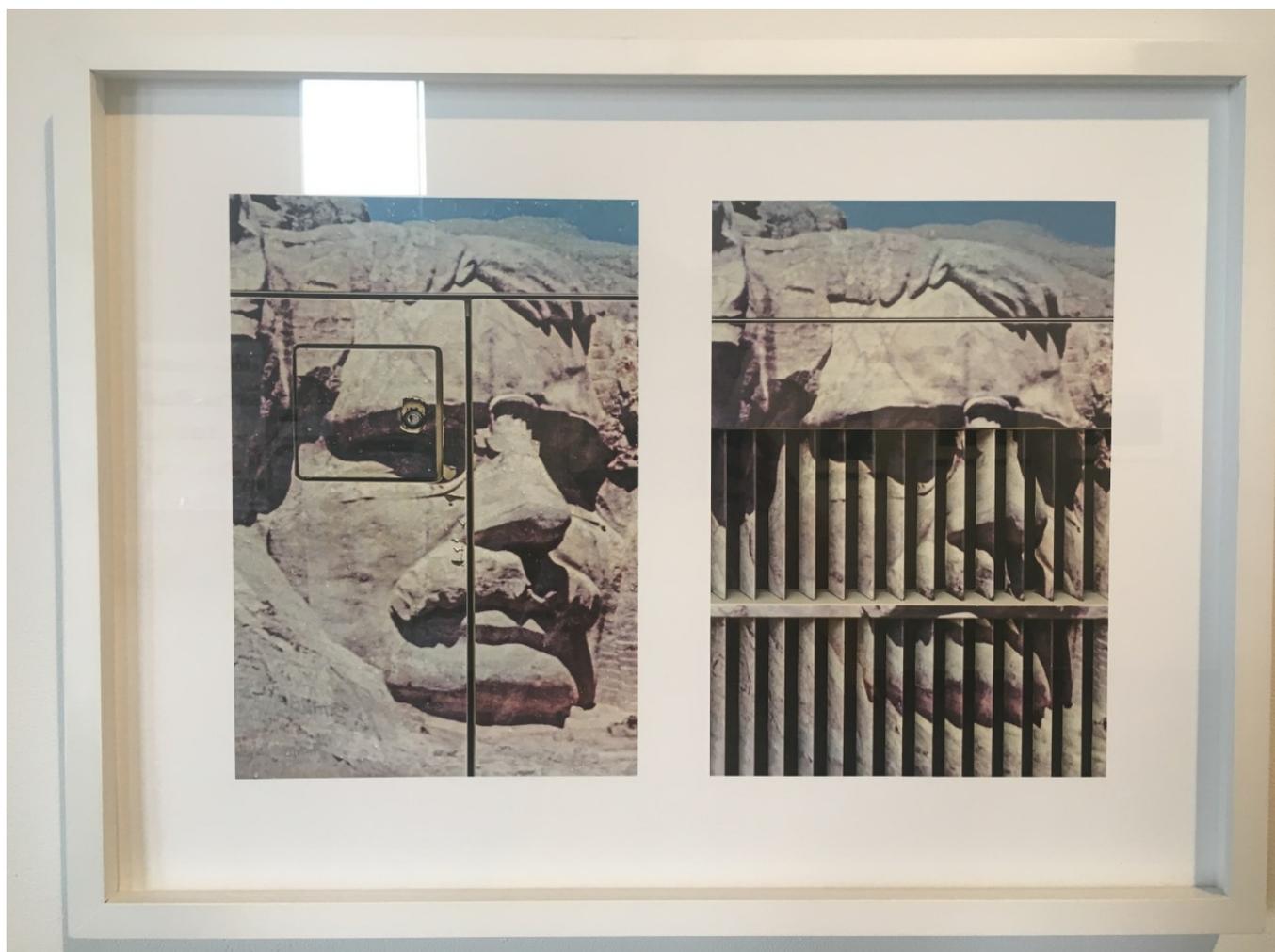
Without diving too deep into a conversation that is largely played out, this is just so obvious an echo to me of the art-historic birth of the photograph (among other technological revolutions) planting the modernist seeds of conceptual art in painting. Like, 'okay, well, if we can't just be images anymore, what can we be?' Self-reference begets itself.



Today, it's likewise the case that photographs in a gallery rarely seem to hold up merely by the merit of their imagery. Some do, sure. But as a whole, how much of the representative body of MoP 2017 were 'just photos', vs. how much seemed to raise the question of the taxonomical boundaries of Photography? Coincidence?

It's interesting because much of the best work that was 'purely photographic' seemed to reference its own flatness (see: the sort of iconic moment of painting's departure from photography, denying the

illusionistic depth of the picture plane and calling attention to itself as an object). Take, for example, Michael Borek's really wonderful series in the entry alcove of Redline's *Between the Medium*, in which various immediately identifiable landmarks suddenly 'freeze' flat as you notice that they're just photos of photos of the landmarks, applied as vinyl to the sides of buses or some other sort of metal industrially-paneled surfaces. These defining, contrasty fissures in the images' surfaces carve their own space up like a Mondrian, referencing the perpendicular edges of the picture plane. The fact that multiple images wind up in a single frame in this body of work only further adds to the feeling that these things are really about themselves being viewed.



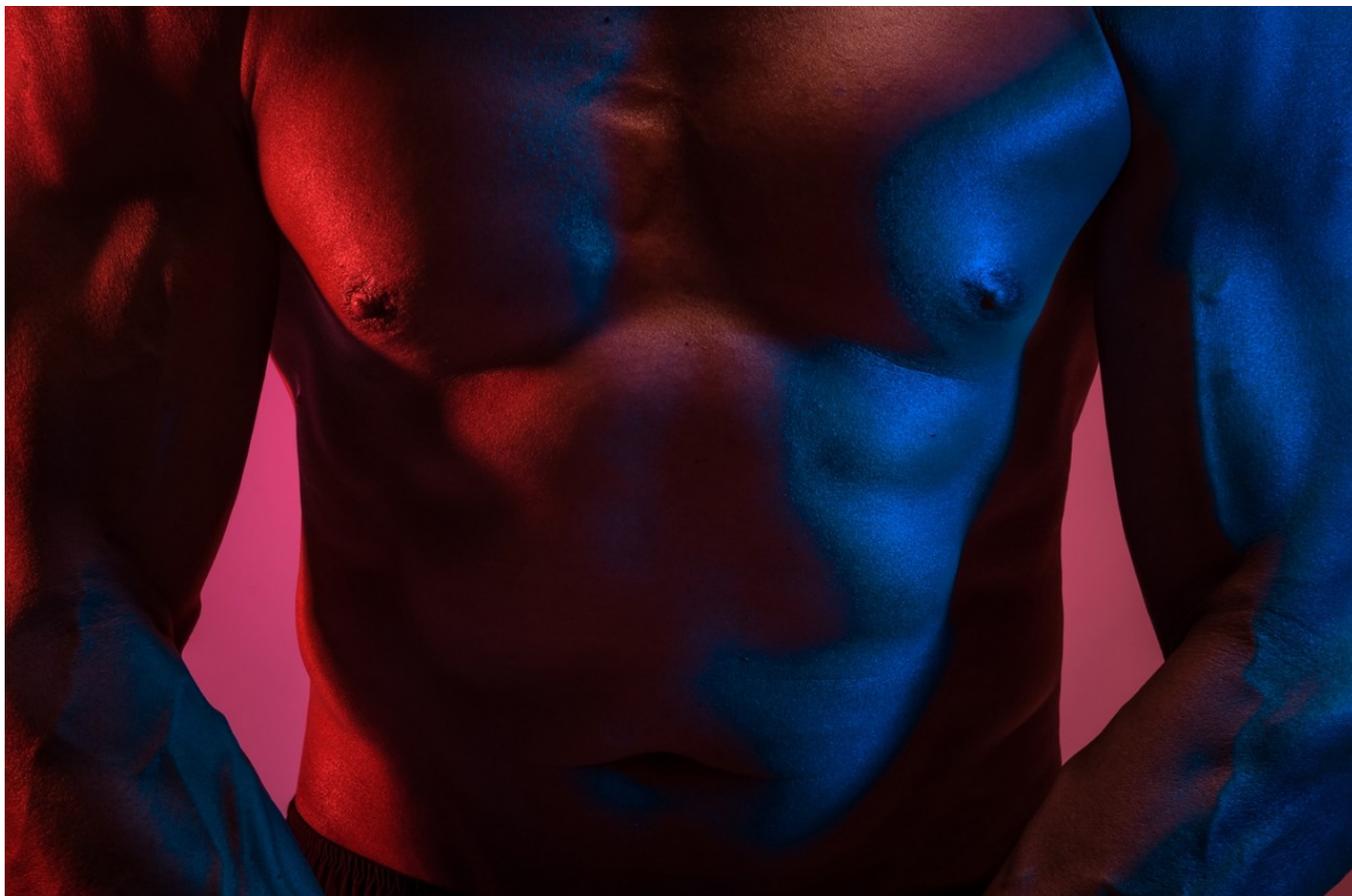
Even further down the line of the 'Expanded Field' trajectory of painterly dialogue, another really exceptional body of work belongs to George Perez at Alto's Denver Collage Club group show. Stacks of home photos with

their centers carved out, like tunnels through remembrance of a vacation or something, are curled from being wrapped tightly in rubber bands. They become objects, almost. At least more than they would simply as a stack of images, which would read as a presentation strategy more than a state of being. The tension in their form, though, sort of snaps you out of viewing their content, and all you can pay attention to is the density of them together, in the room. There's something very real and here-and-now that happens from this – it's what Rauschenberg was seeking, on a humble scale.

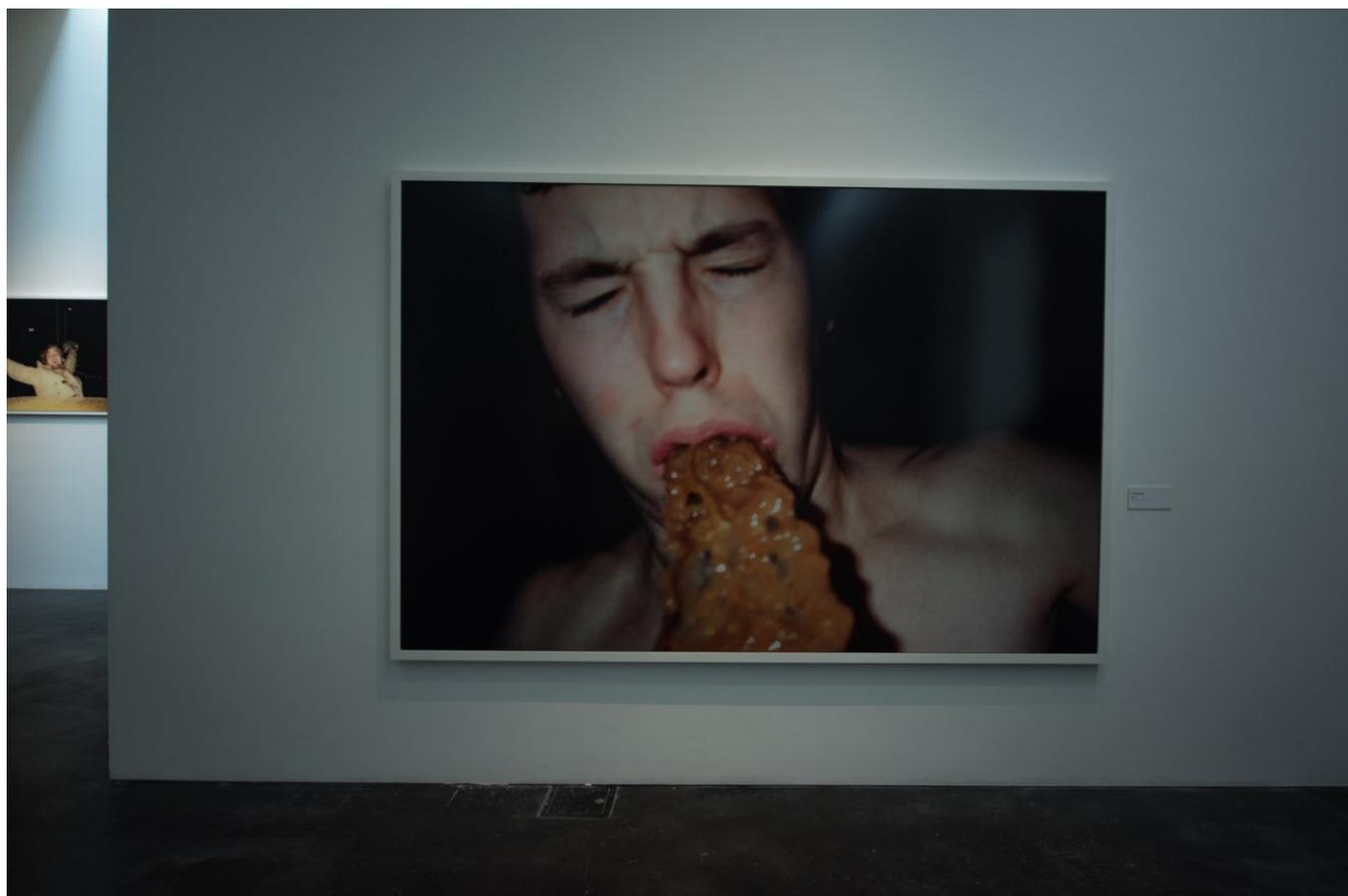


This ‘in the room’ feeling seems to be one of the most prevalent trends for Month of Photography shows this year, in one way or another. At Leon’s

Skins, Tya Alisa Anthony sheds the frames from her images, letting the prints ripple in the air conditioning, the texture of the images breathing the same air as us, getting us all the closer to the skin of her models, the face-value subject of the show.



A similar sort of relationship-to-the-body occurs in the best pieces at CVA's Presence: Reflections on the Middle East, a series in which the ornately decorated windshields and interiors of various public transit buses fill the frame, life-sized, allowing us to sort of sit directly in front of these things, contemplating them as stand-in portraits of who might be driving them. You feel empathy for the ghost of the driver purely for the sake that you could almost step in there. Tableau-vivants.



I mean, I'll admit, I'm definitely putting a spin on all of this, framing all this work this way. I'm biased, I'm a painter. But let's take a step back from the as-painting conversation, and talk about MCA's Ryan McGinley retro. Here is an utterly 'just photo' show, and what's more, it's totally the kind of thing that you would see on the internet. But where the show is interesting is that it's there in physical space with you. It's the fact that an art museum is willing to put blowjobs, pissing, coke-sniffing, and projectile-vomiting on their walls, larger than life. The difference between a computer screen and an art museum was really driven home here when a circa-eight-year-

old girl ran ahead of her parents into the porniest room of the exhibition as I was leaving.





The most successful show this past month, in my opinion, was David B Smith's Penelope Umbrico solo, because it really brought all of the things I've mentioned together in a dialogue that felt very nuanced and high-level. At first glance, it's certainly the most painterly show, with large, manipulated images in various forms of prints and frames, repetitiously referencing fluorescence in various ways. As well as themselves, rather explicitly. But from the serial, tiled arrangements, even overlapping, of the photos, to the most resonant moments – rows of polaroids of lens flares and fireworks, hung just high enough so that the track lighting reflects into your eyes, the show is about the entire thing together, there, in the room. Which is why the way that these polaroids, sparkingly activated by their surroundings, are so much more interesting than the superficially similar arrangement of McGinley's at MCA. When I asked a gallery attendant if Umbrico always made photography, I got the response that photography was her subject, not necessarily her medium. Nice.



Plenty of these shows had politically or otherwise relevant content, but let's face it, none of them really dug into anything in a way more significant than what you'd get from a few seconds of googling their themes on your phone. There's plenty to say about various work that was successful that I didn't touch on, as well, sure. But at the end of the day, the only work that really felt like it was alive and thriving and not just there because it's the biennial was the work that was aware of itself. Maybe aware of its own mortality. Which is where I go back to my original point — that the 'aura', the ineffable thing that was supposedly the last stand of painting in the face of photography, may be all that photography has left to set its fine-art status aside from the unending stream of images we see every day.

“Even the most perfect reproduction ... is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to

–Walter Benjamin, *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936