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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

*Untitled (Vicarious): Photographing the Constructed Object* at Gagosian Gallery

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980 Madison Avenue, between 77th and 78th streets

New York City, 212 744 2313



Wolfgang Tillmans *Beerenstilleben* 2007. C-print, 12 x 16 inches. Gagosian Gallery.

The recently-converted 5th floor galleries at Gagosian uptown have mostly been given over to sprawling group shows of market-driven talent. The space, a low-ceilinged fluorescent-lit warren of former offices, verily hums with chilly attitude. Curator Tom Duncan, a gallery registrar, now brings art history into the mix with this adventurous photography survey, pairing historical and contemporary examples of sculptural construction and assemblage as subject matter.

The show's timeline begins with experimental modernist works by two noted sculptors, American David Smith and Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy. Smith's four exquisite miniature black-and-white gelatin silver prints, *Untitled (Tableau)* (1931-1933), first appear as Max Ernst-like surrealist painted landscapes, but on prolonged viewing reveal themselves to be arrangements of real organic forms, coral and twigs found on a trip to the Virgin Islands. Moholy-Nagy, in his little-seen early vanguard color work from 1936-1946, exploits his then-new medium's theatrical qualities, capturing prismatic light as it reflects off plastic armatures hung in black space. Both artists move photography away from its traditional reportorial definition—toward more open formal abstract readings.

Jumping ahead to the 1980s, works by the Swiss collaborative team of Peter Fischli & David Weiss and also by American James Welling seem intentionally “academic” and “arch” by comparison. Fischli & Weiss's *Blossoming Branch* (1986), a tabletop arrangement of stacked metal clamps, a plastic bottle, an aluminum cooking pan and a dust broom, has all the “traditional” compositional elements of a Picasso bronze. Welling, in his studio studies of drapery, exploits the chiaroscuro qualities of black-and-white printing to willfully static effect, more like Dutch still-life painting.

Cindy Sherman's two large works from 1992 are brazen and provocative by comparison. *Untitled* (1992) is a horrific portrayal of a figure made up of prosthetic limbs and disattached body parts, its face in agony, seemingly in the midst of a sexual assault from an equally distended aggressor. Sherman exploits photography for all its visceral immediacy; she constructs “fictional” self-identities only in order to make them “real” all over again.



Gregory Crewdson *Untitled* 1992-97. C-print, 40 x 50 inches. Gagolian Gallery

Gregory Crewdson follows the radicalism of Sherman's "set-up" strategy to its logical ends in *Untitled (butterflies with braids)* (1997). Yet his results are staid by comparison. The medium-scale glossy color print shows human hair blond braids hanging amidst a dark grove of trees, covered with blue taxidermy butterflies in the foreground. The lighting, saturated palette and cinematic "staging" provide for an overall mood of ersatz surrealist horror.

The younger practitioners follow Crewdson's self-conscious lead, especially Anne Hardy, who makes mock-ups of windowless rooms and loads them with signifying objects: a makeshift lab with beakers, pipettes and notational charts, for example. For her, a lot of effort is exerted creating narrative-looking content that doesn't lead anywhere.

Roger Ballen, working in black-and-white at a modest scale, also feels quite stilted, with his diorama arrangements of cardboard boxes, animal skulls, a live kitten, child-like

scrawled drawings on the walls behind. His work has the psychological flavor of Joel-Peter Witkin's earlier genre-defining efforts (he's not in the exhibit), but without the hardcore goods.

In the end, it is Wolfgang Tillmans (German, b. 1968) who is the star of the show. His works are interspersed among the first three rooms, and they all come across relaxed and intelligent without ever working too hard. At the entrance, *Beerenstilleben* (2007), a modestly-scaled color print, shows empty plastic food containers sitting on a windowsill bathed in light: it is an absolutely considered *and* casual moment. Beauty is returned once again to the realm of a photographer's "eye" as opposed to surrounding conceit. For Tillmans, meaningful abstraction exists all around us in the realm of the everyday. He doesn't need polemical purpose.