

Making History

Photographer uses black and white to fabricate history

by Richard Huntington, The Buffalo News
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Robert Hirsch's "World in a Jar: War and Trama" features images displayed in glass jars placed in 16 stacks.

Review

What:

Robert Hirsch's
"World in a Jar: War
and Trama"

When:

Through June 5

Where:

Big Orbit Gallery

By now black and white photography has its own mystique. In an age when color comes booming at you from every quarter, black and white is a reprieve from the present into the past. It is the language of archival shots and footage, old movies and antique photographs.

But much serious black and white photography plays too obviously on its kinship with the past, its "other age" mood. It can easily turn nostalgic and sentimental, even weepy. But it need not be so, as Buffalo photographer Robert Hirsch's "World in a Jar: War and Trauma" so forcefully demonstrates.

Like many photographers, Hirsch uses black and white to distance and unify diverse images; to imply a living archive whether it's there or not. He also borrows the luster of history that comes attached to this sort of photography.

Precisely how he does it, however, makes all the difference.

This compelling installation in Big Orbit Gallery is a fabricated history made up of a dizzying mix of historical photos, stills from old movies and current TV, medical illustration, scientific diagrams, sections of paintings and old engravings, cartoons and various mundane folk sources, along with original photographs by Hirsch.

All told, there are some 800 images gleaned from the 10,000 or more in Hirsch's inventory. Most are displayed in glass jars and arrayed in the gallery in 16 V-formation stacks placed on a high, curved table that cuts a long arc through the entire space. On the walls, a few of the images are blown up to big scale and presented as framed photographs. Like the jar images, these big pictures are surrounded by a black that seems less a border and more a void.

In the jar installation, even with its staggering array of images, no image has prominence. That's because Hirsch levels the cultural playing field. Whether he's deal-

ing with a Nazi atrocity, some appalling medical procedure, Frankenstein or Bart Simpson, he gives every image visual parity.

But - and this is key - it is done with no cynicism, no black irony, no post-mod reductionism. He lays out these images as equals to jolt the mind into emotional attention. In Hirsch's hands the mixing of the trivial and the serious, the accidental and horrifyingly deliberate, make it seem that every piece is part and parcel of some overarching human drama larger than the sum of these parts.

How he does this impressive feat is found in the darkroom manipulation that greets each found image. The source image might be warped in the copying, throwing part of the the field out of focus. Lines might be heightened, forms skewed or distorted or contrast exaggerated. Cropping radically transforms many an image, especially those borrowed from Goya - that earlier chronicler of war and trauma - and other artists.

Because of these manipulations, an image of a praying head taken from Norman Rockwell's famous Thanksgiving Day painting is harsh, almost brutal, stripped of its sentimentality. Images become abstracted into shapes or are juxtaposed in such a way that real horrific events cannot be easily distinguished from scenes depicting the grisly aftermath of a dissection.

The carefully controlled ambiguity of these images is the source of their powerful collective emotional effect. After a time with these dark cylinders and their strangely floating images, everything begins to seem to be operating on a base level of human tragedy. Nothing can quite free itself from the somber, black void and state its individuality.

The ambiguity in the enlarged wall photos is so affecting that they come close to making the jars seem a convenient contrivance to give flat photos three-dimensional presence. With the barest visual information, a mere shape assumes the gestalt of a Nazi shooting a single black abstraction that slowly reveals itself as the pitiable figure of a huddled mother clutching her child. A now-famous photo of the remains of the World Trade Center towers is here transformed into a haunting, delicate, dreamlike shadow play of dark and light that flits across the vision like a memory does in the mind.

In one of the big photos, a horizontal strip contains the rudiments of eyes and part of a nose - which for all its poverty of information quickly assembles itself into the famous features of Abraham Lincoln. He is a more somber Lincoln here than in his usual manifestations. He has an almost accusatory stare, almost as if he were looking reproachfully at the bleak history assembled in the jars before him. •

e-mail: rhuntington@buffnews.com