

Playing With Mirrors

Two artists push the limits of what cameras can do.

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Photographs, and photographs of photographs; cameras, and cameras pointing at cameras; models, and models posing as models: A kind of brooding over these—and the conundrum of whether, by distancing and framing portions of reality, photography thereby deconstructs itself—typifies a technical formalism that has become widespread of late. Artists in this cohort are not so much concerned with making photographs as with examining them in their manifold and contradictory capacities as objects (sheets of chemically treated paper), manifestations of social praxis (ways of relating to other people and the environment), and immaterial entities circulating freely in the world (as digital information).

[...]

Another artist using images of images to talk about more than just images—to find an oblique way of indicating a subject outside beauty itself—is Jason Loeb (like Sepuya, in his mid-30s), whose exhibition “Private Matters” was recently seen at Essex Street, a gallery on the Lower East Side. The exhibition consisted mainly of a video installation: two projections showing fixed views of urban construction sites and a third traveling shot, presumably taken from a car, of a mostly undeveloped suburban terrain. As much as the rather banal imagery, what catches the eye are the peculiar setups that Loeb has jury-rigged to showcase them. In each case, he has arranged a kind of feedback circuit between two smartphones, one of which contains the video footage, while the camera of the second is fixed on the screen of the first, transmitting its imagery to a projector that casts it on the wall—a live feed of a prerecorded loop. Not only is the quality of the image thereby degraded—as the artist explains, “The camera’s image-processing flow can only capture linear fragments of its digital origin, leading to the contingent, abstracted glint and color banding visible in the projection”—but the second phone is positioned to cast its shadow over the projected image.

The nondescript activity shown in the projections, recorded with something of the creepy neutrality of surveillance footage, could be going on just about anywhere. So ordinary is it, in fact, that I didn’t realize at first that until a few months ago I lived kitty-corner to one of those spots: Essex Crossing, formerly an unsung but perfectly useful parking lot, now the site of a large-scale mixed-use development that seems to be making rapid progress. (The parking lot, in turn, was the accidental consequence of a mid-’60s urban-development project that never came to fruition.) The implications of Sepuya’s deflected gaze always feel patent, though only indirectly indicated; those in Loeb’s work are occluded, like whatever portion of the image has been eclipsed by the shadow of the smartphone that is one of the way stations on its journey from code to visibility. You need to be clued in by the artist’s statement in the gallery press release to understand that what these three places (two in New York City and one in Connecticut) have in common is that they were all appropriated by means of eminent domain, thanks to a 2005 Supreme Court ruling, *Kelo v. City of New London*, which allows private land to be taken for public use—even if that “public use” involves transferring the same property to a new private owner—as long as the result is of “public benefit.” In effect, as Loeb believes, there is a peculiar paradox at work here, in which “the system cannibalizes itself—undermining ownership, its foundational principle.” The mannerist convolution of the phone-to-phone-to-projector system that Loeb has set up here mimics this self-cannibalization. Different as his work may be from Sepuya’s, it likewise sends me back to Guibert’s fundamental insight about the camera and its direct and indirect, coercive and contemplative uses. Speaking again of the photographer using a camera that requires him to look down into the viewfinder rather than at his subject, Guibert says: “His gaze ricochets off a series of mirrors toward his model; a form of desire has replaced the predatory nature, the directional brutality of the 35 millimeter camera.” In the economic domain, if not in the amorous one, desire and predation may not be so easily distinguished. The strategies by which a piece of land is wrested from its owner by another may take place by way of a temporary or nominal transfer to the public, but this deflection loses none of its brutality for all its impunity.

That different relations of property are possible seems to be the idea behind another work in “Private Matters” (a title that would be as apt for Sepuya’s reflections on the studio as for Loeb’s observation of the street, just as “Figures, Grounds and Studies” could as easily have tagged Loeb’s show as Sepuya’s). This second piece—a phallic object made of earth, ornamented with indented designs across its surface—is a replica of what the artist says is a Paleolithic artifact, “presumed to have been carved for ritualistic use by the earliest nomadic Europeans. As migratory peoples, they had no loyalty to territory or land.... The work presents the mutability of the dirt, dust, and mud on which buildings are erected in the symbolic form.” Presumably that form, whatever might be done to preserve it, will eventually crumble; dust to dust.