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As A.I. Becomes Harder to Detect, Photography Is Having a Renaissance

Despite — or, perhaps, because of — the rise in artificially made images, photography is suddenly in the spotlight, in galleries in New York and beyond.

Julia Halperin

“Near Pole Line Road” (2024) by Trevor Paglen. The artist’s photographs of U.F.O.s are on display at Altman Siegel in San Francisco.Credit...The artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Planning to visit Pace Gallery soon? Be prepared for a tight squeeze.

As part of its show on the American photographer Irving Penn this fall, the Manhattan gallery is recreating the narrow corners where Penn once asked distinguished subjects like the boxer Joe Louis and the writer Truman Capote to pose as if they were naughty children in timeout. Curated by the conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas, the show will present Penn’s work in a star-shaped gallery-within-a-gallery inspired by that 1948 set.

The exhibition, which opens on Nov. 15 and runs through Dec. 21, is part of a wave of high-profile

photography shows coming to galleries across the United States, and especially New York. After at least a decade of focusing almost exclusively on painting, many of the largest and most powerful art dealers are dedicating significant attention and real estate to photography.

It is part of a broader renaissance for the medium that is arriving, perhaps counterintuitively, just as images produced by artificial intelligence [become virtually indistinguishable] from real documentation.

“The link between a photograph and the outside world broke very recently and I’m not sure we’ve really thought through the implications of that, culturally,” said the New York artist Trevor Paglen. At Altman Siegel gallery in San Francisco, Paglen is presenting nearly two dozen photographs he has taken over 20 years of novel aerial phenomena, more commonly known as U.F.O.s. The prints, on view through Nov. 2, look at first glance like relatively conventional American landscapes — until you notice a tiny round disc floating through the air in each one, here amid the trees, there above a lake.

These images — which, Paglen notes, are undoctored — embody a core tension in photography: How do we know that what we’re seeing is real? While most photography on view this season does not engage with A.I. explicitly, all of it explores how an image can be manipulated, obscured or framed to tell a particular story.

“In the Legion” (2022) by Jeff Wall, whose work is coming to Gagosian in New York in November.Credit...Jeff Wall, via Gagosian

Two Canadian artists — Jeff Wall, who will have a solo show at Gagosian beginning Nov. 8, and Stan Douglas, the subject of an exhibition at David Zwirner that closes on Saturday, both in New York — are best known for creating and photographing elaborate tableaux inspired by real events that are, in fact, entirely staged. At Gladstone Gallery, also in New York, through Nov. 9, the American artist Carrie Mae Weems is showing several works that look like abstract black paintings on plywood, but are instead photographs of boarded-up, painted-over windows in Portland, Ore., shot in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

The alliance between photography and contemporary art is relatively new. The medium was not regularly traded in the art market until the early 1970s, noted Emily Bierman, the head of photographs for Sotheby's auction house. In the years before Yancey Richardson, an art dealer who specializes in photography, opened her namesake gallery in 1995, Richardson said that she "ran into a lot of resistance — people didn't understand the importance of photography in the contemporary art world."

That began to change in the mid-90s, when the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art established patrons committees dedicated to the medium, a signal that both the institutions and their supporters were serious about collecting photography in a focused way. In 1995, MoMA's photography department acquired a complete set of Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills," a celebrated series in which she casts herself as stereotypical female characters, for a price reportedly in the range of $1 million.

But for the past decade or so, the market for photography has been in a bit of a slump. At auction, Sherman's film stills are selling for, on average, less than half of what they achieved at their peak in the early 2010s, according to the Artnet Price Database. In June, a photograph of the Los Angeles skyline by the German photographer Andreas Gursky sold for 546,100 British pounds (about $715,000) at Phillips; another edition of the same image fetched £1.5 million (about $1.96 million) at Sotheby's in 2008.

Experts attribute the medium's lackluster performance to several factors: collectors of classic midcentury material are aging out and have not been replaced by a new generation; prices for photography climbed too high; and globally expanding galleries pulled back because the international market for photography is not as well developed as the market for painting and sculpture is.

Now, devotees smell opportunity. Photography is the most accessible, omnipresent artistic medium; we take photographs on our phones every day, and process reams of images without even realizing it.

“Painting the Town #17” (2021) by Carrie Mae Weems, one of several images that look like abstract black paintings on plywood, but are instead photographs of boarded-up, painted-over windows.Credit...The artist and Gladstone Gallery, Fraenkel Gallery and Galerie Barbara Thumm. Photo by David Regen

This broad popularity and accessibility is a boon for galleries looking to cultivate new collectors as the wider art market cools. (Auction sales in the first six months of 2024 were down almost one third from a year ago, according to the Artnet Intelligence Report.) Collectors can buy a photograph by an established name for considerably less money than they would spend on a painting by an artist of similar stature. “Photography is a gateway drug to collecting,” Bierman said.

Last summer, 35,000 people visited Gagosian’s exhibition celebrating the American fashion photographer Richard Avedon’s centenary in New York, making it one of the gallery’s best attended shows in recent years. Gagosian also hired its first director of photography, Joshua Chuang, and added the photographers Nan Goldin and Deana Lawson, as well as the estate of Francesca Woodman, to its stable in the past two years.

In 2020, Pace merged with its photography-focused sibling, Pace/MacGill Gallery, consolidating its interest in the medium. In addition to the Penn show, Pace is presenting an exhibition dedicated to the creative process of the Swiss American photographer Robert Frank in New York from Nov. 15 through Dec. 21. The show coincides with an in-depth solo exhibition of Frank’s work at MoMA, which runs through Jan. 11.

Drew Sawyer, a curator of photography at the Whitney Museum, noted that photography tends to flourish in moments of economic contraction, citing the late 1970s, when a cohort of artists known as the Pictures Generation emerged, as well as the early 1990s and the years following the 2008 recession. “It’s allowed galleries to experiment,” he said. “Knowing that sales are harder all around, why not give artists an opportunity who haven’t had it to show?”

This moment, however, is unique. The rise of A.I. image generators makes physical prints feel all the more outmoded, and therefore all the more like fine art objects — rare specimens that ought to be valued for their craftsmanship, luminosity and composition. “New tech has made even digital photography seem somewhat romantic and nostalgic,” Sawyer said.

Several shows are embracing the nostalgia and objecthood of the photograph, highlighting artists who create images through old-fashioned or unconventional means. In November, the gallery Karma, in New York, is presenting 26 cyanotypes — a slow and cameraless photographic process developed in the mid-19th century — by the artist Peter McGough, each capturing a nude male model (or two or three or four) forming the shape of a letter of the alphabet.

In Santa Monica, Calif., Marshall Gallery has an exhibition (through Nov. 2) of work by the American artist Chris McCaw, who uses large-format cameras — one is larger than a shopping cart — to channel the sun onto photosensitive paper the same way a child uses a magnifying glass to burn a leaf. Over the course of anywhere from several minutes to 24 hours, McCaw captures the sun's movement across a landscape; the resulting image looks as if a giant nail ripped through the composition, leaving behind a tear in the fabric of the sky.

Richardson, the photography dealer, noted that young artists were increasingly interested in working with photographic archives and using images that spoke to their milieu, influences and personal histories as raw material. Her gallery's exhibition of the Mexican artist Omar Barquet, which opened on Thursday and runs through Dec. 21, features layered collages of oracles and prophetesses drawn from books, photographs and art history.

Paglen, the photographer, said that because A.I. "removes the assumption of a shared reality," photography may forever lose its power to change minds and alter the political landscape. If the image of a hooded prisoner being tortured at Abu Ghraib, which was published in 2004, or the 1972 "napalm girl" photograph, which changed public perception of the Vietnam War, were released today, he said, people might not even believe they were real.

Yet for some, this paradigm shift makes photography's role as an art form all the more significant. "For the past 12 or 15 years, there hasn't been as much interest in the fine art market around photography en masse," said Thomas, the artist curating the Penn show. "I've missed it."