

catherine gfeller

It is perhaps a given that much of what we know about places comes from the images that have been used to represent them. With photography, in particular, we use these images as surrogates for reality. That which we think we learn from them is informational and derived from image content. We use the picture as fact.

New York City is one of the most commonly represented cities in the world. Even if you have never been there, you know facts like “That is the Empire State Building.” There are carriages in Central Park.” “Most of the faces in Harlem are black” and this is knowledge you share with citizens of Kuala Lumpur, Port Moresby and Montevideo, even if the incantation of their place names fails to conjure a picture as certain and immutable as the words New York City do to so many. Visual knowledge of place is, after all, a one way window very often.

Everyone has seen a photograph of New York, but more marginalized places spring less often to one’s visual mind.

For a young artist photographing there, New York’s challenge is in its very familiarity. The vocabulary for its expression often seems fixed in the eternally gritty and noir. New York is in black and white. It is a parade of stereotypes and icons. It has been done. Whether we “see” New York through the eyes of Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Paul Strand, Jacob Riis, Walker Evans, Lewis Hine or Arnold Eagle, some preceding vision, not actually our own, is what gives us the city we walk through.

Catherine Gfeller’s New York turns these shadows on their heads. Her lushly colored, abstracted fantasies speak not of modernist angst and the superior isolation of the artist but of a joyful acceptance of (and immersion in) chaos that makes its own patterns. This is not to say that Gfeller is ignorant of her artistic ancestors. The work acknowledges expressionism, collage and, indeed, the colors of the Fauves, but moves beyond them to a synthesis that only feels organic. This work might be seen as the product of a Blakean innocence after experience. If it is beautiful and sensual in its own right, that is a tribute to its successful melding of past and present, chaos and order, technique and aesthetic instincts. As Walter Tschopp points out, this is work of daring counter-intuition. Imagine using a horizontal format for the awesome verticality of skyscraper-bounded canyons! Just think of depicting a city gutter and facade, not in shades of gray, but in luscious, crazy tones of lemon, raspberry and chartreuse.

Even the surface of her prints---the dense, matte subtlety of watercolor papers--- startles and then seduces eyes used to the slick and poreless face of gelatin silver.

Though it departs from the traditions of photographic modernism and documentary that have shaped much of our knowledge of cities, there are facts to be gleaned from Gfeller’s “Urban Rituals” that are as real, if not as material, as a street corner, fire hydrant, or “No Parking sign. As Catherine de Saint Phalle’s wildly expressive commentary/jam reminds us, these pictures tell us how this city feels to one happy outsider. These pictures are less about image content than about the form through which the feeling of a place is expressed. Feeling is also fact, and it is through feeling that we may see this familiar place in new and even splendid ways.

Alison Nordström
Daytona Beach, 1999