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Modern Photography in a Brand-New Space

Since its 2003 survey of Thomas Struth, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has been getting serious about photography. In 2005 it presented a Diane Arbus retrospective and, in a stunning move, acquired more than 8,500 works by absorbing the Gilman Paper Company Collection. Last

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spring it offered a glimpse of video and new-media works from its holdings. (Who knew the Met even had video, let alone a David Hammons?) Now the museum has designated a gallery exclusively for the exhibition of photographs made after 1960.

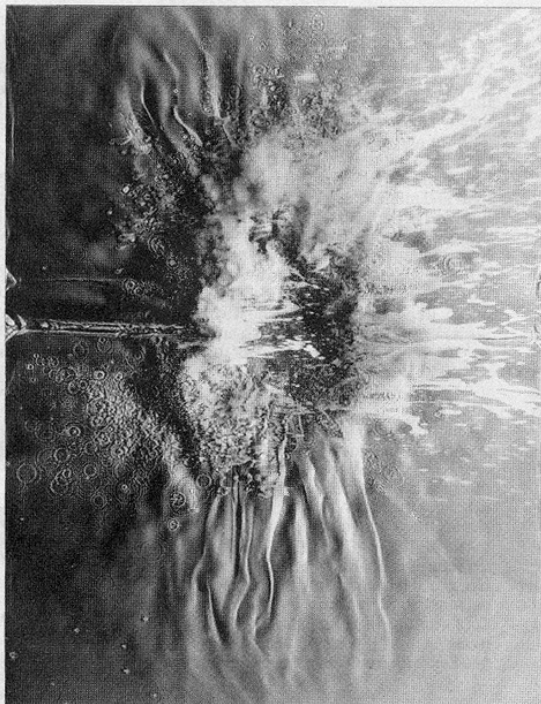
The new space is certainly an improvement on the rotating photography displays located in a crowded, noisy hallway outside the modern-art wing. There, tucked between a gift shop and a bathroom, visitors could get up close (often too close for the curators' comfort) to the large-scale works the museum had been acquiring since the department of photography was founded in 1992.

Those pictures will finally have some room to breathe in the new Joyce and Robert Menschel Hall for Modern Photography, a high-ceilinged, gray-carpeted sanctuary on the second floor, across from the special exhibition galleries for drawings, prints and photographs.

The inaugural installation, "Depth of Field: Modern Photography at the Metropolitan," a sampler rather than a thematic slice, makes the Met's priorities clear. The photography curators at MoMA need not worry: "Depth of Field" presents a distorted history of photography, dominated by white, mostly male Europeans and heavily weighted with references to history and landscape painting.

Things are off to a promising start with Adam Fuss's "Now!" (1988), a large and dynamic photograph made by splashing photographic paper with water just as the flashbulb popped. It faces off with Rodney Graham's "Welsh Oaks #1" (1998), a topsy-turvy

"Depth of Field: Modern Photography at the Metropolitan" continues through March 23 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

"Now!" by Adam Fuss is part of the exhibition "Depth of Field."

Depth of Field

Metropolitan Museum of Art

tree (the roots extend upward, the branches downward) that suggests the upside-down projection of a camera obscura. These two arresting images put the process of photography front and center, even as they undermine the medium's historical, documentary function.

They are bright spots in an installation that formalizes even the most free-spirited artists. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's series of photogravures depicting footprints in the sand are imprisoned in a vitrine. Wolfgang Tillmans, known for his personalized installations of multiple photographs, is (mis)represented by a single, large-scale still life. Trisha Donnelly's "Satin Operator," an abstract image made by rolling a photograph on a flatbed scanner during the exposure process, is the lone exception, pinned to the

wall like an exotic butterfly.

As the presence of the Donnelly suggests, a surprising amount of space is devoted to artists whose practice wasn't, or isn't, exclusive to photography. One wall holds a mixed-media representation of a Dennis Oppenheim earthwork, a photo collage by Gordon Matta-Clark (depicting the New Jersey frame house he split in half) and a shot of the sculptor Charles Ray bound to a tree branch during his famous 1973 performance.

Across the room is Sigmar Polke's semi-abstract image of men drinking, made from a negative exposed in a São Paulo bar and selectively developed. This photograph-as-hangover reveals the darker, boozier side of an artist better known for his Pop-inflected painting.

The show's German hegemony begins with the Polke and continues into the second gallery, through the Bechers and their prodigious offspring Struthsky.

(The name is shorthand for Andreas Gursky and the Thomases, Ruff and Struth). Mr. Struth's "San Zaccaria, Venice" (1995), an image of tourists awed by a Bellini altarpiece, shows the museum and the photographer engaged in polite mutual appreciation. In contrast, it is somewhat shocking to see the Met contextualizing (as few museums can) photographs from 9/11, comparing Mr. Ruff's enlarged JPEG of the smoking World Trade Center towers to Turner's 1834 painting "The Burning of the Houses of Parliament."

Comparisons to painting abound in the wall text, as if to justify photography's presence in a museum full of Rembrandts, Vermeer and Caspar David Friedrich are used to bolster Sharon Lockhart's nighttime shot of a man staring out from a disorientingly reflective window. The Lockhart is flanked by one of Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of gangly teens and a Cindy Sherman from 1981, in which a jeans-clad Ms. Sherman lies on a blanket in an apparent state of post-traumatic shock. These works give off a seductively standoffish vibe, as if the Met were making fun of its own awkward phase.

Despite its limitations, "Depth of Field" is not a bad debut. The museum is exceptionally positioned to tell the story of early photography, especially since the arrival of the 19th-century-heavy Gilman Collection. The recent past is not a priority, but for that we have MoMA, the New Museum and, increasingly, historical exhibitions at commercial galleries. We can also expect more from the Menschel Hall's future installations, which will explore themes like "photography about photography." (The Richard Prince cowboy that closes "Depth of Field" is just the beginning.)

The museum has chosen the Rodney Graham as the show's promotional image, but Mr. Gursky's "Schipol" (1994), taken inside the Amsterdam airport, might be more to the point. The Gursky, as the wall text tells us, is "a landscape layered with nostalgia, structured by modernism and sealed behind glass." Which also describes the Met's restricted view of contemporary photography, beautiful though it is.