Two centuries in five rooms
The Nasher tells a story of photography in Light Sensitive

BY CHRIS VITIELLO

Are there enough good photographs in North Carolina collections to demonstrate the evolution and complexity of this nearly two-centuries-old medium? The Nasher Museum of Art believes there are, and the result is Light Sensitive: Photographic Works from North Carolina Collections.

Co-curated by the Nasher’s interim director Sarah Schroth and Duke University art history and visual studies professor Patricia Leighten, the 300-plus pieces in Light Sensitive have been culled from the holdings of 12 North Carolina collectors. This grab-bag approach to a show presents a curatorial hazard. If you don’t approach a pool of available artworks with a critical filter, the show risks becoming a self-congratulatory extension of the collectors’ living rooms.

Schroth and Leighten answer this challenge by positing five categories of photographic techniques or themes—one per gallery. The first room, called “Light Magic,” reminds us that light is the bare essence of the medium. The photographers here find ways to celebrate, wonder at and play with the light bouncing off or emanating from their subjects and entering their cameras. Or, in Vera Lutter’s case, entering her room. Lutter named a room overlooking the Fulton Ferry Landing of the Brooklyn Bridge into a pinhole camera to take her monumental 1996 negative image. The pinhole process links back to photography’s origins in the camera obscura, though shouldn’t this be displayed upside down to be true to that process?

Durham-based Frank Hunter’s tiny gem “Old Apple Orchard” (2003) catches one of those moments when sunlight’s interaction with the world takes one’s breath away. A tree emerges from tall grass, with the extreme angle of a setting or rising sun directly behind it. The leaves and body of the tree go to total black, but the grass catches the light on a million ornate angles and surfaces. Hunter registers the pure and ephemeral pleasure of seeing.

In the next room, “Intensified Vision,” the photographer’s eye for the weird steps to the fore. Two of Robert Frank’s classic New York street photographs from the 1950s provide a hipster counterpart to a photo by Wilson, N.C., lensman Burk Uzzle, “Jesus with Hat Under Glass (Florida)” (2006). (Uzzle speaks about his work at the annual Semans Lecture at the Nasher on Thursday, Feb. 28.) The best moment in the room comes from a pairing of photos by Alex Harris and Alen MacWeeney, respectively: “The beach at Miramar, looking north from Rudy Hernando Ramos’ 1957 Chevrolet, Havana, May 20, 1998” and “Flies in the Window, Castlestown House, Ireland” (1972). MacWeeney frames his shot so that a constellation of dead flies on a window sill is on the same visual scale as cows in the field that the window overlooks. The window frame becomes gigantic between these specks of life and death, demonstrating how vision makes the world. Like MacWeeney, Harris uses a pane of glass to represent a camera lens. Through a windshield, we look north over the water—to the United States, an unachievable goal. But the interior of the Chevrolet, the most American of cars, forms the majority of the image, suggesting that relationships are more important than jurisdictions and nationalities.

Up next, the “Metamorphosis” room gathers work in which the photographer alters reality through technical choices or constructs an alternative reality through staging or post-production. One of Sally Mann’s stack images from the 2006 series Motherland (Virginia) exemplifies the former. Using antique lenses and cameras, along with a wet-plate collodion process that dates to the 1850s, Mann creates a temporarily disrupted way of looking. Distortions and washed-out light feed back upon her Southern U.S. subjects, implying that the subjects are basically the same as they were a century ago.

Two of Anthony Goicolea’s images will be familiar if you saw his 2011 retrospective at the N.C. Museum of Art. He produces large collages, achieving a too-perfect, hyper-real effect. The gallery’s best image, however, is Kenneth Josephson’s perfect “New York State 1970.” In black and white, the ocean and the horizon meet, and the photographer holds in his non-camera hand a postcard image of an ocean liner as if it’s sitting on that horizon. Josephson’s white-sleeved arm is flattened in the perspective of the image. With a gesture as literal as Magritte’s “This is not a pipe” painting,
Josephson evokes the most essential form of metamorphosis—taking a representation as a stand-in for the real. The "Emulations" room documents how photographers imitate other art disciplines. In one of two video works in Light Sensitive, Iraqi artist Ali Assaf's "Narciso" (2010) imitates Caravaggio's painting of Narcissus gazing at his reflection, but the theme is contemporary rather than classical: He's grieving for his hometown of Al Basrah, once known as "the Venice of the Middle East." Assaf assumes the dress and pose of the Italian painter's subject, gazing into the water as a variety of personal objects float by-like debris. Vik Muniz inverts Assaf's strategy, meticulously arranging trash such as rusty bolts, bike wheels and appliance hulls on a San Francisco warehouse floor to mimic Old Master paintings. In "Apollo and Diana, after Lucas Cranach (Pictures of Junk)" (2006), tiny washers and grease-darkened nuts create the goddess' hair, while the god's tunic is made of a wadded red strip of canvas or plastic tape.

The final room of Light Sensitive shows, through a startling variety of portraits, how photographers express and even produce identity. "Identities Constructed" offers several daguerreotypes to start, along with a book of Alphonse Bertillon's late-19th-century criminology portraits. More contemporary work throughout the rest of the room asserts how photography has linked image and identity more intensely than any other medium. It's hard to take your eyes off of a 1965 Diane Arbus shot of a woman sitting on a Washington Square Park bench in New York. Coiffed and in crisp focus, the woman is nonetheless inscrutable as she stares out of the image's frame. Few had the knack for getting the human cipher onto film like Arbus.

At the exit, Light Sensitive holds one final treat. Durham-based MJ Sharp's "Outside Amanilo" (2006) glows in a darkened, sanctu-ary-like hallway. It's far from an afterthought: The beautifully textured image of a grain elevator is hung apart from other works for fear that its shiny surface would carry their reflections. As the show's final piece, Sharp's long-exposure image provides an apt bookend to Lutter's opening pinhole picture.

Inspired by the wealth of photographers and collectors in the state, Schroth and Leighton may make Light Sensitive the first in a series of exhibitions. If this show just scratches the surface of North Carolina's photographic talent and collecting acumen, we can look forward to such bounty at the Nasher for years to come.