

Thomas Barrow DEREK ELLER GALLERY

This exhibition surveyed more than thirty-five years of photographer Thomas Barrow's art, from the early series "Cancellations," 1974–81, for which he first became widely known, to a recent body of work, "Detritus Bags," 2009–, made by placing objects and images into small plastic pouches. At first, little seems to unite the work at the two ends of

this time span. The "Cancellations" are small black-and-white prints of banal landscape photographs taken in the American West, each of which is interrupted by an X made by incising the negative with an ice pick. Among the objects tightly packed into the "Detritus Bags" are soda-bottle tops, wax vampire teeth, photographs, exhibition-invitation cards, plastic toys, even the artist's Bank of America debit card. One series is elegantly austere and cerebral, the other a random jumble.

There were just enough artworks here allow one to follow the thread of Barrow's interests from beginning to end. The smooth surface of each print in "Cancellations" is metaphorically disrupted by the reminder of the scarred negative from which it was derived. Soon



Thomas Barrow, *Sexual Ecology*, ca. 1990, spray paint on gelatin silver print, Polaroid prints, 28 x 25".

thereafter, Barrow attacked his prints directly, cutting them apart, then suturing them back together with silicone caulk. He also spray-painted their surfaces, introducing washes of color, often along their edges. By the early 1980s, his experimentation had led him to Rauschenberg-like collages that incorporated several photographic techniques. To make *Evolutionary Notes*, 1983, Barrow created photograms of various letter-shaped stencils, a toy spider, and what looks like blades of grass or strips of paper; spray-painted the work's surface; and then affixed eight Polaroid prints to this ground, giving it crenellated edges. These photographic collages would increase in visual complexity throughout the decade, culminating here in the ca. 1990 work *Sexual Ecology*, which draws its (largely erotic) imagery from diverse sources: Polaroids of exercise tapes and porn playing on television screens, photo-mechanical transfers of magazine or book pages, and what appear to be line-art drawings of models and mannequins.

The work Barrow has made in the past two decades progresses logically from what preceded it. The magpie impulse that animated his collages of the '80s became more pronounced as Barrow increasingly paired his images with mass-produced items of little value—a hard-cover copy of a novel called *Peeping Tom*, plastic and rubber children's toys, even marshmallow Peeps. His juxtapositions are often witty: *Peeping Tom*, 1989–90, pairs the eponymous book with nearly twenty Polaroids, many of which depict faces that Barrow has photographed from a television screen, staring back at the viewer. By concentrating on images that had been broadcast over the airwaves—images that would otherwise have never taken material form—Barrow once again draws attention to his works' photographic materiality. (This sense is enhanced by the current obsolescence of Polaroid film.)

Barrow has been successful in his efforts to shift away from the "window on the world" transparency granted photographs. However, whatever thoughts about photographs—beyond the fact of their material presence—he wishes to communicate via his recent artworks is lost beneath the morass of *things* he is incorporating into them. (It is difficult to describe the "Detritus Bags" as photographic at all.) Perhaps we're meant to understand these accretions as a commentary on the sheer ubiquity of images—that today they are no more than cheaply produced *stuff*. The fact that they seem formally unresolved—that they're unsuccessful as sculptural assemblages—would buttress this argument. But it's difficult to know if these are his aims. Barrow's "Cancellations" were photographic koans, exquisitely concise meditations on the conditions and conventions of photography. By comparison, the later work can't help but seem, well, bogged down.

—Brian Sholis