

Christopher Russell: “the ghost of background” at 2nd floor projects, San Francisco

Contributed by Leora Lutz

Christopher Russell’s solo exhibition at 2nd floor projects features a series of 70 works entitled “Landscape” that remark upon connections with the not-so-distant past. The images are of men having sexual encounters in the overgrown brush of San Francisco’s Buena Vista Park in the mid 1990s. Hung salon style, the photos invite the viewer to pass through bushes along with Russell as he took the photos through a hole cut in the pocket of the thrift store windbreaker where he hid his camera.



Landscape #34, 1997/2013. Epson Ultra Chrome HDR on Canson Platine paper. Courtesy of the artist

The photos are black and white which lends to the surveillance effect of clandestine image-making. The relationships and exchanges that unfold are far from clandestine, however. Some of the men are in small groups of three to six people all in close proximity to each other. Many of the men are looking right into the camera (unbeknownst to them). Light shines through the trees and contrasts the feeling of romantic interludes that are shrouded in secrets while out in the open – the paradox enhances the very strangeness of the bodies in the pastoral scenes.

Because Russell was covert, there is no flash being used, which means that this is daytime, or at least before dusk. Most of the photos would be reminiscent of old Victorian nature pornography if it weren’t for the clothing that reveals a more contemporary era. The men are dressed casually, in jeans, khakis and t-shirts or simple button-up shirts – nothing special. It’s as if this ritual of seeking hook-ups is part of a daily routine. When the encounter is over, one need only stroll back down the street and go on with the rest of their evening.

There are a variety of activities the men are engaging with that impart tenderness or longing while others are raw – but none are particularly violent and everything is clearly consensual. Two men in a prominently displayed photo are in passionate yet awkward embrace – their pants down not quite to their knees, a glimpse of phallus pressed between their bodies. Others are in more abject poses, graphic and purely sexual, partaking in carnal and obvious gestures, their rhythms frozen. I couldn’t help but be reminded that because this photo was taken, that means that the photographer was right there, and no one seemed to mind. However, it goes without saying that if they had known there was a camera, I am sure there would have been a different story. In a way we are in a position of privileged voyeurism.

Russell and I remarked about the era of face-to-face-only encounters and meeting people at places like bars, or art openings or work, etc., which still happens, but now there are also GPS apps for finding out if a stranger is looking for “a good time” within a few feet of you. But the app makes cruising culture disparate, flexible and rather than isolated and underground that the mystique of the park implies. The park cleared all of the brush some years ago, which means the scene is literally removed from that location. The photos are not only a record of connections and images, but they are also an important archive that maps a specific culture which is bygone but by no means gone.