

In images of immediacy, everlasting art

Documenting the aesthetic side of Polaroids



“Maria Shriver” by Andy Warhol.

Courtesy: THE ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff / April 19, 2011

Polaroid photography has always been seen as a technological marvel (the camera as its own darkroom!). It’s not often thought of as an artistic marvel. The point of “Instant Connections: A Polaroid-Themed Exhibition” is to remind us that Polaroid marvelousness can extend to aesthetics, too. The show runs through May 2 at Panopticon Gallery.

Jason Landry, the gallery’s owner, and Jim Fitts, his co-curator for the show, aim to demonstrate just how diverse Polaroids can be in art photography. So a show that’s big to start with, more than 75 images, feels even bigger, thanks to there being such a range of subjects, styles, and approaches. The diversity extends to size, too: from those 3 1/4-inch-by- 3-inch rectangles familiar to any SX-70 owner back in the ’70s (like visual index cards), to 20 inches by 60 inches in Arno Rafael Minkkinen’s “Doric, Ionic, and

Corinthian Columns” (the “columns” coming courtesy of Minkkinen’s posing of his hands and forearms).

Polaroids are most often associated with documentation. Need to record damage for the insurance adjuster? Want to show the kids what the birthday cake looked like before they fell upon it like locusts? Take a Polaroid. As if to counter that association, there are numerous instances of Polaroids put to near-painterly use, from the richly lustrous color of Olivia Parker’s four pictures to the hallucinatory interior that is James Casebere’s “Watery Hallway” to the way John Reuter’s “Reticulation” and “The Kiss” recall Pompeian wall paintings.

The earliest image in the show is from 1966, Marie Cosindas’s “Andy Warhol, the Velvets, the Factory, NYC.” Warhol was usually on the other end of a Polaroid viewfinder. Quick, simple, disposable, uninflected: His style and its attributes were a match made in visual-imagery heaven. There are four Warhols in the show, all portraits. If the amount of makeup Maria Shriver is wearing in hers is any indication, the quickness in taking the photograph did not extend to preparations for it.

Of course there are preparations, then there are preparations. Mimi Youn, a young South Korean artist, can take upward of six weeks to make one of her . . . well, what, exactly? Ostensibly photographs, they seem to belong to a category all their own. Youn takes a Polaroid photograph, the image often overexposed or otherwise vague in appearance. She then slices words into the print, sometimes working over the surface in other ways. There are a half-dozen examples of her work in the show. They’re delicate and intimate, mysterious yet also straightforward — like right-angled curves or flowering stones.

Stephen Sheffield, with more than a dozen photographs in the show, is its largest contributor. Like “Instant Connections” as a whole, his sampling could serve as a miniprimer on how variously Polaroid technology can be put to use. His images are alternately austere, ominous, and funny. The man holding the title object in “Gasoline Can” is smoking — and thus likely to find cigarettes doubly hazardous to his health.

“Instant Connections” includes a photograph of a certain famous recording artist who recently won a Grammy. Contractually, Panopticon is not allowed to publicize the identity of the sitter, a blackout that extends even to reviews. I can, however, divulge the identity of the Grammy winners in the other show at the gallery. The 22 pictures in “Rowland Scherman” include multiple images of Bob Dylan, mostly taken at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, and the Beatles, from 1964, at their first US concert, in Washington, D.C. Scherman’s a Grammy winner, too. He was so honored in 1968 for one of the pictures in the show, which was later used as the cover shot (tightly cropped and, oddly enough, flopped) for “Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits.”

The one person associated with the show who didn’t win a Grammy is Robert F. Kennedy. There are several photographs of him on the campaign trail in 1968. RFK was, in his political rock star way, as much a part of the ’60s as Dylan and the Fab Four were — though neither of them, surely, ever had the electric effect on a group of nuns that

Scherman captured in one of the show's most memorable images.

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