

Jenny Okun at Craig Krull Gallery

ARTWEEK June 1998

Jenny Okun's exhibition of abstract color photography takes the modernist convention of montage to a new and complex level. Derived from architecture, Okun's work is highly charged, remarkable for its complexity and subtlety. If there was ever a doubt about abstract photography's merit or longevity, this wonderful show will make the skeptic a believer.

Influenced by modern European art at the beginning of the century, some of the finest photographers began experimenting with forms of expression which included unusual points of view, geometry and unconventional subject matter. One of the finest of this group was Alvin Langdon Coburn, who developed a series of photographs which were made by utilizing mirrors. He called them Vortographs, from Vorticism, the British cubist movement. If Okun has a spiritual predecessor, it is Coburn, and his call for photographers to "throw off the shackles of conventional expression" could surely be her motto. But where Coburn's images have a rather studied and carefully composed academic feel, Okun's work vibrates with passion and spontaneity, while simultaneously referencing the architecture from which it arises.

Of the fifteen images on display, thirteen are triptychs. The artist makes superimposed exposures in camera by incrementally advancing the film and selectively exposing the frame, repeating this throughout the roll of film, producing one long continuous negative. To a photographer, this process sounds like the recipe for a confusing mess, making Okun's stunning imagery all the more impressive. After digitizing the images and perfecting them in the computer, the artist is ready to have them output, mostly as 32-by-48-inch iris prints produced by Nash Editions.

The color of the work ranges from intense to subtle with the variation of hues accented by overlapping angular shapes of color. She photographs under bright light and plays with the highlight and shadow contrast in both outdoor and indoor scenes. In *UCLA 'Towell' Library Triptych* (1996), deep cobalt blue is accompanied by canary yellow, lavender and the glare of sun reflected from aluminum. Amazingly, the three frames of the triptych have a symbiotic cohesion and the movement from left to right, or vice versa, is so smooth and natural that one easily forgets the complexity of the process from which it arises. *Getty Shadow Triptych* (1997), done as part of a poster commission for the newly opened Getty Center, is luscious in its overlays of blues and grays and black. Bands of shadows are repeated in segments of metal railings; their juxtaposition with the sunlit facade resembles both a gothic cathedral and a corporate skyscraper—quite appropriate for that museum.

Triangles, rectangles and trapezoids of overlapping color and form, some referencing the building, others far removed, create these images of vibrant energy. Sky, steel and glass all become one and while never totally removed from recognizable life, the subject of this work is clearly less about the structures than about the time and energy of the people who built them, and the passion of she who photographs them.

—Thomas McGovern

Jenny Okun: Architectonics closed May 16 at Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica.

Thomas McGovern is a freelance writer in Los Angeles.

