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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Structures With Soul: Cubist Combinations of Multiple Fractured Images

By MARGARETT LOKE

For more than 20 years, Jenny Okun has trained her Cubist eye on buildings, creating images of startling verve and vitality.

When Cubism was young, photographers like Paul Outerbridge explored its possibilities with a camera. Outerbridge's still lifes of the 1920's and '30's are elegant Cubist abstractions, the results of a superb manipulation of light and an artful assemblage of objects. Ms. Okun, on the other hand, produces her Cubist images by doing what Cubist painters did: offering several views of the same object in one image.

Focusing mainly on architectural detailing, Ms. Okun usually takes a sequence of six exposures on an extended negative, the overlapping exposures making up a splintered but graphically coherent whole. Eleven large Iris prints of her latest Cubist studies, including multiple-exposure single images and triptychs, are on view in "Jenny Okun: Architectonics" at the Claudia Carr Gallery in SoHo. It is a dazzling show.

If Cubism is basically about revelation, then Ms. Okun's images often reveal the very soul of the buildings she photographs. Take the odd-looking pyramids in "Las Vegas Library Triptych, 1996." This is a whimsical portrait of a cone-shaped building that has small round holes for windows. In the triptych, the cones float on top of and next to one another, two tall palm trees on either side of the cone in the center panel resembling a mischievous headdress. This is a library? Yes. It's a children's library designed by Antoine Predock.

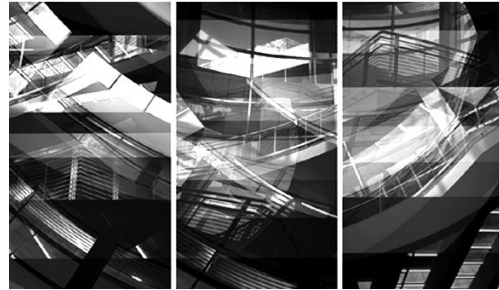
By contrast, looking at "Getty Entrance Triptych, 1997" you might get the sensation you're on some majestic liner that's gently rocking to the motion of the ocean waves. There are all those splendid railings sweeping down and up, all those deep shadows and that azure blue sky. Needless to say, the entrance of the new Getty Museum in Los Angeles is grand, its circular staircase arresting. Ms. Okun was commissioned by the museum to photograph the new center,

which was designed by Richard Meier, and one of her images was selected for the poster commemorating its opening last month.

Ms. Okun doesn't seem at all fazed by the prospect of taking on the very familiar. Soaring cathedrals have become clichés, but "Exeter Cathedral, 1995," with its burst of gold (from the overlapping gilded arches) in a sea of darkness, is exuberant, mysterious, glorious. In the minimalist "New York Night Plaza, 1995," anonymous tall office buildings outlined by a scattering of white lights are juxtaposed with a spotlighted Plaza Hotel tower. It is an image that evokes all the romance and elegance of a Cole Porter song. On the other hand, the normally romantic gondolas of Venice are, in "Venice Boats, 1996" both jazzy and utilitarian.

From the time Ms. Okun began to experiment with Cubist imagery in 1973, when she was a 20-year-old art student in London, she has managed to retain a freshness of perspective and a willingness to go on experimenting. It was while she was making an experimental film of waves breaking on the beach that she happened on the idea of making multiple exposures to achieve the Cubist effect she wanted. In hand-cranking the film backward and forward — to mimic the movements of the waves — Ms. Okun had dislodged the film from its sprockets and created many superimposed images. She hated the film but was instantly taken by the superimpositions.

She bought a secondhand Hasselblad that could take wide-angle and telephoto lenses. It had a back that held the film and that could be removed between her sequential exposures when a thin piece of metal, called a dark slide, was in place. To make an exposure, she would first pull out the dark slide to allow the film to be exposed when the shutter was tripped. After each exposure, she would insert the dark slide, turn



Claudia Carr Gallery

"Getty Entrance Triptych, 1997," a photograph by Jenny Okun.

the advance lever by a small increment and then remove the camera back holding the film. To prevent the film from advancing automatically, she would cock the shutter all the way before reattaching the camera back for the next exposure. All the while she had to mentally keep track of the exposures she had made and planned to make.

In the beginning, Ms. Okun used 24 slide projectors to help her work out the multiple exposures. As a student filmmaker she was familiar with the 24 frames per second in a movie film — hence the 24 slide projectors. But she stopped using the projectors after a while, when the images they created became too precise and predictable.

Early on, Ms. Okun took photographs of landscapes, but they were too tame for her taste. She then looked for objects with straight edges, and buildings had lots of them. She quickly established a routine. Before setting out with her camera, she studies the building's details, then sketches possible exposure sequences and perhaps even talks to the architect.

Two of the images in the exhibit show how easy it is for Ms. Okun's approach to fail. "Loyola Triptych, 1995" doesn't go much beyond the busy chaos of edges and diagonal and parallel lines. "Getty Terrace Triptych, 1997" is a bland mix of similar elements. They seem academic, missing that essential spark so much in evidence in her other pieces, especially in "Los Angeles County Museum Triptych, 1996."

In this astonishingly beautiful work, the Deco-like new museum extension and covered walkway is a symphony of bold shadows and zig-zag detailing, including rows of emerald green glass bricks. In a minor key are lines of steel beams subtly continuing from one panel to the next or finding their echoes in a third panel. And in a kind of arpeggio, high up in the middle panel are a hint of the soaring pillars of the walkway and a spot of blue sky.

"Jenny Okun: Architectonics" is at the Claudia Carr Gallery, 478 West Broadway, near Prince Street, SoHo, through March 7.