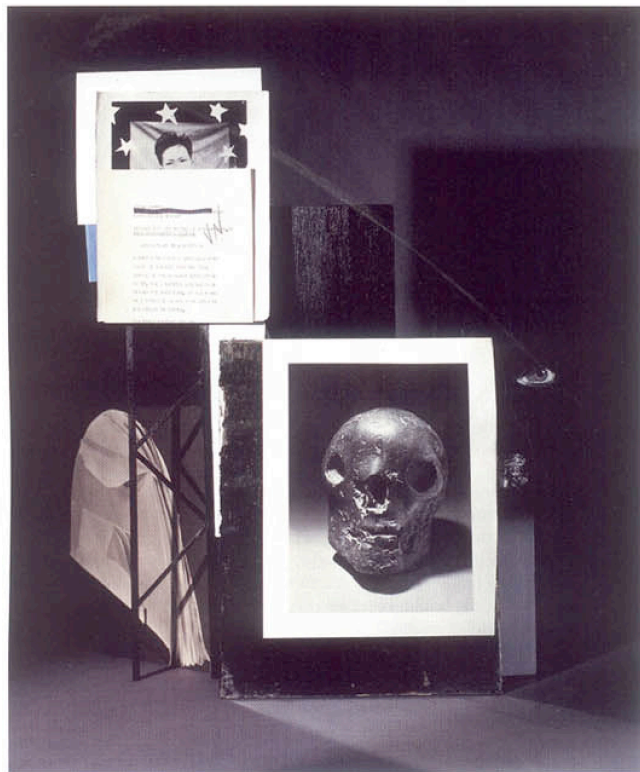


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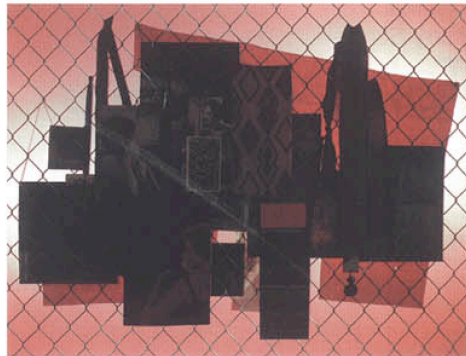


FIRST TAKE

Anne Ellegood on

Sara VanDerBeek

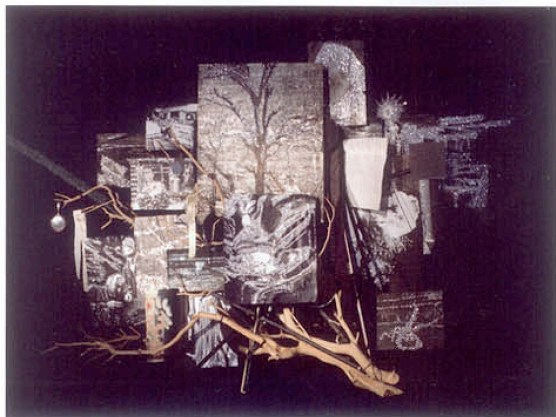
IN ON PHOTOGRAPHY, Susan Sontag claimed that all photographs are memento mori, tinged with an intrinsic pathos that encourages an awareness of our mortality. In the context of our historical moment—mournful and uneasy after September 11, overwhelmed in the face of violence and human suffering in Iraq and Darfur—this property of photographic reproduction seems particularly appropriate for an artist to engage. Certainly, the intimately scaled photographs of handmade assemblages that comprised Sara VanDerBeek's first solo show, "Mirror in the Sky" (last year at D'Amelio Terras in New York), are deeply resonant in this regard. In her photograph *Decorations in a Notebook* (all works 2006), for example, VanDerBeek places an Associated Press image of a Vietcong soldier adjacent to a reproduction of Pablo Picasso's haunting sculpture *Death's Head*, 1941, whose isolated skull form has been lit by its original



photographer in order to cast a dramatic shadow to one side (the appropriated image clearly derives from a catalogue of Picasso's work). Another piece, *A Reoccurring Pattern*, conspicuously adopts the visual language of the memorial, featuring a collage of portraits and patterned textiles affixed to a chain-link fence, a coupling reminiscent of the spontaneous shrines that adorn urban streets after a fatal accident or other tragedy.

The latter photograph could be said to provide something of an allegory for VanDerBeek's practice. Her instincts are those of a collector—a cataloguer, an archivist, a keeper of images—and this compulsion to save otherwise discarded or potentially forgotten representations of the past makes time tangible. The artist amasses advertisements, film stills, newspapers, postcards, exhibition catalogues, old *Life* and *Fortune* magazines—all found at flea markets, at yard sales, and in her late father's archive. (A visionary and renowned experimental filmmaker, Stan VanDerBeek exhibited an interest in Surrealist collage, and his innovative sequencing and overlapping of an abundance of found images created a rich visual language his daughter has clearly absorbed.) She carefully assembles these appropriations into tabletop constructions made of tree branches, painted wooden forms, accumulations of buttons, and other simple materials, all bound together with string and accented with pieces of mirrors, crystals, swatches of textiles, and even the occasional macramé piece, upon which her selected photos can interact. VanDerBeek then shoots numerous photographs of each composition but selects only one print as the final work before disassembling the sculpture, keeping the remaining images and trinkets as part of an ongoing collection of objects to be incorporated into later work. Thus, each photograph becomes the permanent, lasting manifestation of her process, taking up photography's ability to memorialize gestures or moments lost to time's forward march.

VanDerBeek, it seems, has an innate understanding of how photography (perhaps the most ubiquitous presence in our contemporary life) operates in the world, and it is the starting



Opposite page, from left: Sara VanDerBeek, *Decorations in a Notebook*, 2006, color photograph, 24 x 20". Sara VanDerBeek, *A Reoccurring Pattern*, 2006, color photograph, 30 x 40". This page, from left: Sara VanDerBeek, *Extravaganza*, 2006, color photograph, 30 x 40". Sara VanDerBeek, *Ziggurat*, 2006, color photograph, 40 x 30".



point and the ending point of her practice. Indeed, the way in which VanDerBeek pictures our world, while creating both erasures and distortions, suggests her awareness that each photograph, for all its apparent relationship to truth, is a manipulation of sorts, whether through posing, decontextualization, framing, or juxtaposition. Her attentiveness to photography's capacity for simultaneous presentation and obfuscation is evident in her selection of existing images, cropping techniques, and overlappings, and recalls poet and critic Susan Stewart's provocative assertion that collections reside somewhere between public and private space, "between display and hiding." The artist clearly controls our view into her three-dimensional assemblages; the inclusion of images of Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, 1918, and of one of Frank Stella's frameless abstract black paintings in her work titled *Ziggurat* makes the viewer more mindful, by way of contrast, of the photograph's edges, and of the photographer's intervention as the framer.

VanDerBeek typically also reveals something not previously apparent in the objects and found images by themselves. Consider *Extravaganza*, in which the artist, with eerie elegance, chalks up a death toll reminiscent of

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Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series: In addition to a car crash appropriated from Warhol, VanDerBeek's assemblage features a *Life* magazine photo of a supine (and astonishingly intact) woman lying dead on the ground after having jumped from a building; a counterintuitively gorgeous image of a mushroom cloud; the terrible shot of Martin Luther King Jr. collapsed on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis; and the figure of Marilyn Monroe, whose visage is provocatively obscured in

VanDerBeek's structure. Each picture is lovingly adorned with lines of silver glitter and precariously propped up against tree branches skinned of their bark. Whereas Warhol's invocation of tragic figures participated in their transformation into icons—his use of repetition paralleling the numbing reproduction of individuals and events in the public sphere—VanDerBeek maintains their expressive, emotional quality. Eschewing repetition in favor of combining visually linked but distinct images, VanDerBeek disallows their full or succinct consumption by the viewer, layering them and adding her own material flourishes—returning these images, in effect, to the private sphere. Viewers slow down and consider connections and possible meanings among the images and objects, rather than scanning them as one would a magazine or a billboard.

Such intimacy is significant for the cultural relevance we recognize in VanDerBeek's borrowed images (which have their own particular history of quotation and circulation), taken primarily from the 1910s to '20s and the 1960s to '70s, periods marked by enormous artistic innovation and social upheaval. Her astute selection of imagery proposes that the events depicted—and the attendant themes of mortality, celebrity, political strife, representation—are somehow synchronous with our time. It is this capacity to tap into our moment by borrowing images from the past—shared by other contemporary artists such as Kelley Walker, Seth Price, David Noonan, and Edgar Arceneaux—that gives VanDerBeek's work its sense of urgency. Socially aware and yet still somehow sweetly personal, her miniature worlds are balancing acts of the hopeful and the morose—at times nostalgic, perhaps, but only while asking audiences to consider the ramifications for our future should we fail to keep with us the tragedies and traumas of the past. □

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