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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Video and Photographs That Teeter on the Edge

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

Annandale-on-Hudson— SLEEPY Annandale-on-Hudson seems like a strange place for a Center for Advanced Curatorial Studies. But here it is, a state-of-the-art, bunkerlike teaching and library center with a suite of swanky galleries for exhibitions on the leafy grounds of Bard College. Among art types, the place has a faintly magical prestige.

The center's summer program includes a show of photographs and a video installation by Slater Bradley, and "Sodium Dreams," a group affair with artists from the United States and Europe exploring the relationship between photography, film and the city. Both, reinforce the center's reputation as a risk-taker.

Mr. Bradley, 28, has been slowly building a fan club for his casual, curbside snapshots. Purposely shorn of aesthetic concerns, they portray friends, family, lovers, his travels and day-to-day details of life as an artist in a messy modern metropolis. Together, they amount to a kind of Generation X "Remembrance of Things Past."

Assembled by Amada Cruz, Mr. Bradley's exhibition contains an extended photographic essay and a video installation. The essay includes many tender and surprising images, among which are a number of pictures of whales decomposing on the shores of Ocean Beach in San Francisco. Seeing their endless, beached ranks is heartbreaking.

Many of the photographs contain a kind of primordial vitality. Partly it's the subject matter, with numerous shots of people sleeping, showering and eating, and partly the artist's carefree technique. Mr. Bradley belongs to the point-and-shoot school of photography, but he has a better eye than most. His photographs possess a rare, radiant humanity.

The closer you look at these photographs, the greater your appreciation grows. The same goes for Mr. Bradley's video installation, "Theory and Observation" (2002). It was shot from the back of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris with a hand-held camera, the artist zooming in on the faces of choirboys rehearsing on stage. The images are set to the sound of the physicist Stephen Hawking talking about the origins of the universe and some other music. Religion collides with science in this piece, although it's done so gently neither gets hurt.

Just as Mr. Bradley's images are elegantly brainy, so, too, are the works on view in "Sodium Dreams." Pulled together by Elizabeth Fisher, a postgraduate curatorial assistant at the center, the show boasts United States premieres of new works by French, Canadian and British artists, as well as one or two more familiar pieces. All together it's a fine show.

The title of the show refers to the chemical (sodium) used to make those orange-yellow street lights popular in Europe. They give off an iridescent glow, the equivalent of which Ms. Fisher has found in the work of a handful of contemporary artists. Washed in a jaundiced light, the Norwegian Knut Asdam's photographs of modernist tower blocks are isolating and bleak. Shot at night using long-exposure times, they are sentimental in a spooky or chilling kind of way. Perhaps it's the lack of people, or the obvious signs of disrepair on the cold, concrete facades. I like them, though.

Ubiquitous housing projects also star in the Canadian-born Mark Lewis's new films, seen in the United States for the first time. Silently panning across a sprawling low-income housing project in London, slated for demolition, Mr. Lewis convincingly conveys the sense of a harsh and comfortless space.

With an eerie soundtrack by Liam Gillick, Sarah Morris's film "Midtown" (1998) is filled with a sense of foreboding. Nothing happens in the film, which consists mostly of footage of Midtown Manhattan at rush hour, although the psychological tension keeps your eyes fixed on the screen for the full nine and a half minutes.

Bridget Smith's subject is "the architecture of spectacle," according to Ms. Fisher. I'm not sure what that means, although I did like her detached, oddly serene photographs of Las Vegas from unusual angles, at unusual times of day.

Many artists have photographed Las Vegas, but few have done so as thoughtfully as Ms. Smith. It helps that she is a master colorist, and has an almost preternatural sense of light, but also that she seems agile enough to step around the usual visual clichés. For Ms. Smith, the bright lights of Las Vegas are a sodium dream.

"Slater Bradley" and "Sodium Dreams" are on view at the Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, through Sept. 7. Information: (845)758-7412.

Photos: "Psychasthenia 10, No. 2," above, by Knut Asdam, and "Our Love Is Like the Earth, the Rain, the Trees and the Birth," top, by Martin Boyce, are both in the exhibition "Sodium Dreams." An image, top right, from "Theory and Observation," the video installation by Slater Bradley. Both exhibitions are at the Center for Advanced Curatorial Studies at Bard College.