

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Photographs That Tell Unsettling Tales

By KAREN ROSENBERG
Published: July 8, 2010

Is a mosquito bite a form of travel? Maybe, according to a photograph by Dennis Oppenheim. It shows the pest alighting on human flesh but offers this thought to compensate for the inevitable itchy welt: “The blood now conforms to the interior configuration of an insect, thereby placing part of you in a state of aerial displacement.”

You can see Mr. Oppenheim’s piece in a lively little collection show at the Metropolitan Museum, “Between Here and There: Passages in Contemporary Photography.” It asserts that many artists from the 1960s to the present tried to relay or reflect some experience of dislocation. That experience might be [Ed Ruscha](#)’s drive down the Sunset Strip, Doug Aitken’s airplane flight or [Richard Long](#)’s walk through the British countryside. It could be Bruce Nauman’s jerky, robotic march across the floor of his studio, seen in one of several videos in the show. Or it could even be the movements of an actual robot: the unmanned lunar probe Surveyor, equipped with a tracking camera.

Like past exhibitions in this narrow slip of a gallery, which is permanently devoted to contemporary photography, “Between Here and There” works harder than it has to. The effort pays off in some of the unorthodox choices, like the [NASA](#) photos; less so in the heavy-handed wall texts, which had visitors on a recent holiday Monday scratching their heads. Going with the split-room layout, the associate curator Douglas Eklund uses the 1980s as a chronological and conceptual fence. Viewers may remember that Mr. Eklund also organized the Met’s recent [survey of the “Pictures” generation](#), which highlighted that decade. Here he vaults right over it, with the exception of two modest works by Félix González-Torres and Anne Turyn. The first half of the show, drawn mostly from the 1960s and ’70s, takes “displacement” to mean serial or peripatetic motion: textbook Minimal and Conceptual art, in other words. But this section isn’t as humdrum as it sounds, thanks to the dry wit of many of the works.

Here, for instance, is On Kawara’s “I Got Up,” part of a series of postcards this globetrotting artist sent to friends or colleagues, each stamped with the time he happened to arise that day. His circadian rhythms were erratic, to say the least, though the work’s title hints that sleep wasn’t the only thing on his mind.

Nearby you can see the Austrian artist Valie Export lying down — not in bed, but on the curved curb of a traffic island in Vienna. The image is from her series “Body Configurations,” in which Ms. Export and other female artists played up the physical hostility of urban architecture. Another performance artist, [Vito Acconci](#), made photography a ticklish form of experimental theater. Working quickly from the stage just after the house lights dimmed, he took a set of flash photos of the audience. You can see his guests, including the artists [Robert Smithson](#) and Nancy Holt, looking bored and slightly irritated.

34 Orchard Street
New York, New York 10002
frontdesk@lisa-cooley.com
www.lisa-cooley.com
P 212-680-0564
F 212-680-0565

Next to the Acconci, Mr. Smithson's set of photographs "For Bern Snow — Mirror Displacement in the Alps" shows tiny mirrors embedded in snowdrifts. This test run for a larger project in Switzerland was done in New York, on the roof of Mr. Smithson's Greenwich Street apartment building. You might think of it as a landscape twice removed.

Even more disorienting is a postcard by the contemporary artist Matthew Buckingham, a vision of Canal Street storefronts facing an actual canal. It was inspired by a never-realized 1791 proposal to build a "Venetian-style" waterway across Lower Manhattan.

Mr. Buckingham's piece (from 2002) makes a neat segue to the second half of the show, which contains larger, splashier color photographs and videos from the past decade or so. Here displacement becomes a subject as much as an artistic strategy.

One whole wall is given over to Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of Almerisa, a Bosnian refugee girl living in the Netherlands. Ms. Dijkstra photographed Almerisa regularly from 1994 to 2008, in more or less the same setting and pose. The pictures have a soothing consistency and, though they're not intrusive, a sense of accountability — as if the photographer were a family doctor or case worker.

There are some big names in this gallery, including Jeff Wall and Thomas Struth, but the most memorable piece comes from a younger artist, Erin Shirreff. Her video "Roden Crater" appears to have been taken at [James Turrell's unfinished earthwork in the Arizona desert](#). The color of the sky changes as the sun rises and sets over the crater; gradually you realize that you're looking at a photograph, transformed by a succession of lighting effects in Ms. Shirreff's studio. (There's a telltale flash reflection on the print's surface.)

Ms. Shirreff is making a clever point about the complex relationship among earthworks, photography and tourism. Other works take the travel theme more literally: Mr. Aitken's photograph of a distant plane in flight, taken from his window seat on another plane, and Darren Almond's inverted film of a German monorail (with a propulsive techno soundtrack).

These are the voyages we already know about, the stuff of countless exhibitions on the alienating and exhilarating effects of globalization. But "Between Here and There" shows us some more unusual trips, like the one that starts before you even feel the itch.

"Between Here and There: Passages in Contemporary Photography" continues through Feb. 13 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.