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The Art of Color

Photography from Stieglitz to Sherman at Milwaukee Art Museum

By Curtis L. Carter

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For most viewers today, color photography is taken for granted in art as in everyday life. This was not always the case, as documented in the Milwaukee Art Museum's exhibition "Color Rush" (through May 19).

The curators interpret the history of color photography using familiar magazine and newspaper images alongside original photographs. Hollywood movie posters and film clips, and even a slide show depicting Depression-era Farm Security Administration photos not initially released to the public, contribute to the story.

What was required to change skeptical views concerning color photography as art? First was the invention of color image-making processes, and then making color photography familiar and affordable with the aid of Kodachrome film and other means. "Color Rush" begins with 1907 autochrome glass plate photographs by Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen and continues through contemporary reflexive art images by Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin.

The exhibition is organized pedagogically into four main sections: “Early Automatic Color” covers pioneering experiments by Stieglitz, Steichen and *National Geographic*; “Consuming Color” takes in commercial uses of color images in *Life*, *Vogue* and Hollywood posters; “Choosing Color” showcases the color photography of leading American artists beginning in the 1940s; and “An Explosion of Color” brings art photography from the aftermath of World War II into postmodernism.

A virtual Who’s Who of American artist photographers fills the exhibition galleries with thought-provoking images. Included are Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Harry Callahan, Irving Penn, Walker Evans, William Eggleston and Helen Levitt, as well as contemporaries Stephen Shore, Jan Groover, Joel Meyerowitz, John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman.

The tenor of the exhibition flits from “the nice to the naughty” behind a black curtain at the end of the gallery space with Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency 1979-2001*. This 43-minute slide show installation of intimate personal images with musical accents portrays the artist’s personal reading of contemporary lifestyles, focusing on sex, drugs, relationships and identity.

“Color Rush” invites viewers to look beyond appearances and explore the meaning of color images in our daily life and artistic heritage. The impressively researched exhibition catalogue is sure to become a standard reference for the history of color photography.