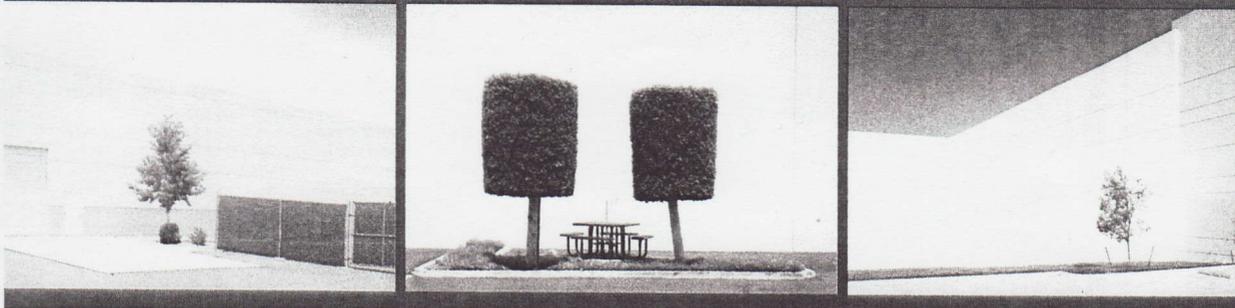


A Snapshot of Los Angeles Photography

Michael Shaw



above: (l-r) C-prints by J. Bennett Fitts, all 36" x 51", 2008; *Topiaries with Lunch Table*; *Two Trees*; *Yellow Tree*

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY walks a fine line between remaining beholden to tradition and pushing new ground. There are the established rules, and there is breaking away from them, as well as somewhere in-between. The international art fair Photo LA hits town on January 11 and will be followed by two notable solo shows featuring young, local, photo-based artists.

The history of contemporary photography here can be viewed as one rooted in a means-to-an-end sensibility as much as an art in itself. Think of Ed Ruscha's artist's books and John Baldessari's appropriations; and, of course, the numerous cases of artists using photography in conjunction with other methods. "There's a much greater awareness of contemporary art practice as a whole," said Charlotte Cotton, curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg photography department at LACMA, of artists working in photography today. For them, "It's part of a pan-media practice."

L.A.'s current climate reminds Cotton of the early '90s, "now that we've hit another recession." She continued, "I was working

for a museum [in London] when there was a vibrant, non-market art scene . . . artists were doing what they wanted to do, not looking to galleries." She raved about a mid-November event put on by the nonprofit gallery Machine Project ("A Machine Project Field Guide to LACMA"), which she estimated 5,000 attended. She spoke of the risk-taking spirit: "When you know there's less chance to make money from your practice, you'll see what you want to do."

Christopher Russell's photo-based work takes on such a multi-platform program. He sometimes goes, quite literally, against the grain of photographic tradition. Many pieces are made by using an X-Acto knife to carve patterns directly into his photos — sometimes wallpaper

patterns, sometimes ghostly drawings, and other times heavy gauges. It's noteworthy that Russell's gallery, Circus, is participating in *Photo LA*, as Russell's work couldn't be more atypical of the work usually seen there. The stalwart scribe behind *Bedivetter*, "the 'destroy-to-enjoy' literary art zine," Russell has devoted as much time to writing as to art-making. His recent work includes his own short stories translated into photo prints, with images produced by coloring the text, both groups of words and individual letters. An installation made up of these variations will open at the Hammer Museum, as part of its Hammer Projects, on January 13.

There are questions about **how** it's going to survive or change with digital technology. . . I think **photography** just has this **big question mark** over its head. —CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL

J. Bennett Fitts, a relatively traditional photographer, will be anointing Kopeikin Gallery's new space in West Hollywood on January 31. (Kopeikin, which shows virtually all photography, will also be at *Photo LA*.) The show, titled *Industrial Landscape[ing]*, is part of an ongoing series begun in

2003. Shot with a large-format 4 x 5 camera, the photographs depict the barren exteriors of hefty industrial parks, with their token accents of landscape, such as a single tree on a spare patch of grass. While there's something quintessentially L.A. about these cramped vistas, in fact they've been shot all over the West. Starting in the Riverside area, "to have the continuity," Fitts continued shooting parks in Reno, Dallas, Houston, and Salt Lake City, as well as throughout Southern California. "Everywhere I traveled, I went to industrial parks," said Fitts.

Fitts cites the influence of the "New Topographics," specifically

the work of Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, and Frank Gohlke, who were part of an exhibition of the same name organized by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography in 1975. The work took as its subject the "man-altered landscape," and as such was indebted to if not directly

influenced by, Ruscha's parking lots and gas stations. Just as Ruscha's work has taken certain veins of L.A./Southern California culture and internationalized them, so too, in their own way, do Fitts's industrial parks. He describes them as embodying "the mythical stereotype of the Los Angeles landscape. It's the look we have in our head when we imagine what the landscape looks like here." And the "we" is no longer limited to Angelenos. "We've sold this stereotype to the rest of the country," Fitts added, "and they've ended up with the worst of the L.A. landscape."

As Fitts launched *Industrial Landscape[ing]*, his initial approach suggested that the work was an-

centrally in line with, say, that of Ruscha's parking lot series; but over the years, that angle has changed. "At first it was sort of ironic humorist," he said. "Now it's almost elegiac . . . there's a little more somberness to it." Fitts's identification of and with the local landscape is no longer local, as it expands from L.A. to the West to the rest of the country.

Russell's local dynamic, meanwhile, is more a case of duck and cover. His work initially came out of street photography: "You think of San Francisco, Chicago, New York . . . which are all very walkable cities," he said. Though the Glendale resident continues associating himself with the form (in the recent work, it's nuanced at most), being

in L.A., with its dearth of walking possibilities, has turned Russell's vision inward. "If I were in a more romantic city, I don't think the romantic would have crept into the work the way it has here . . . because there's this sense of isolation. And what do you do with that isolation? I retreat into my head and try and make sense of things there." He's been able to think about some of his ideas on commutes to University of California, Irvine, where he's been teaching. "I merge the photographic collection with this other body of thought that just develops . . . as you drive."

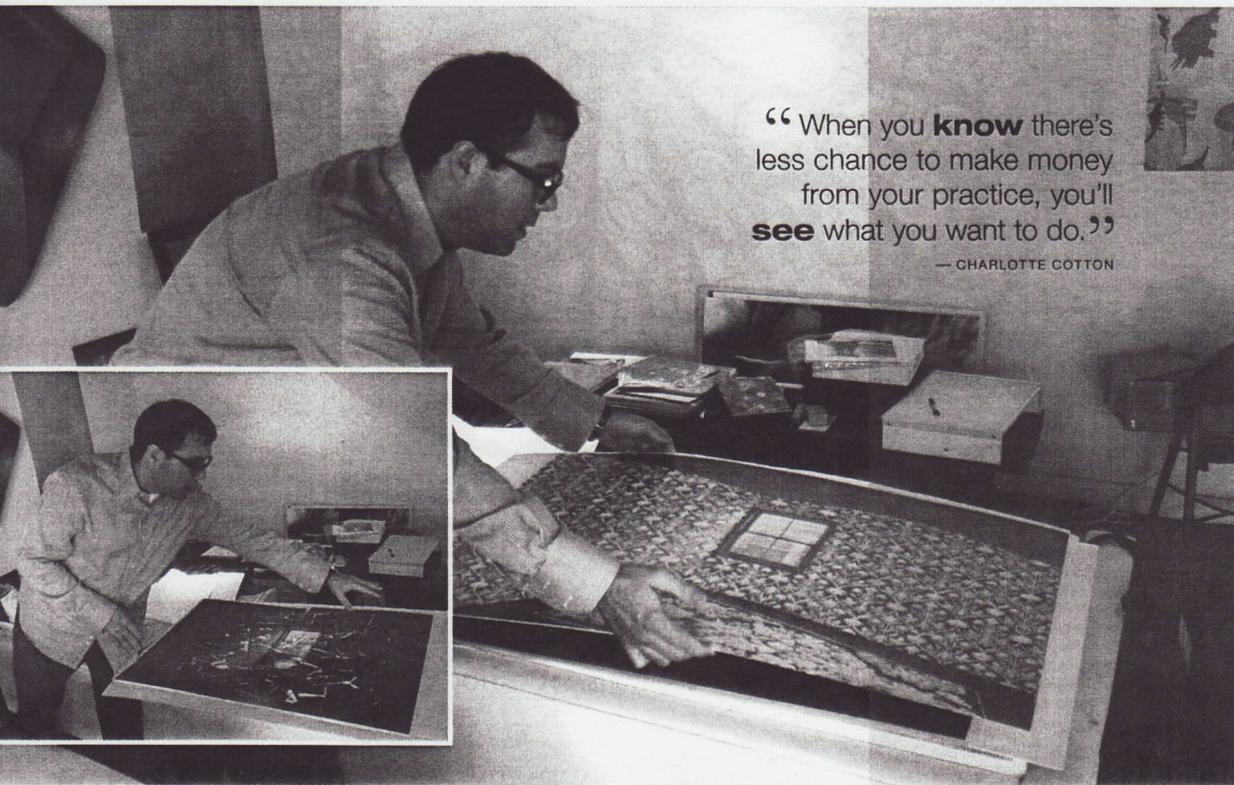
When asked about photography in Los Angeles, Russell seemed to hint at not only a continued gen-

eral pluralism in art but also of photography being further mixed in to the greater blend: "L.A. is so interdisciplinary, it's hard for me to say what photography is right now. I know it's out there and people are working in it, but it doesn't seem like it's a priority in this moment. It's like photography proved itself in the '90s, with [Andreas] Gursky's million-dollar photo, and that was kind of the swan song for photography; it sort of went into remission. There are questions about how it's going to survive or change with digital technology . . . I think photography just has this big question mark over its head." ■

As part of Photo LA, Charlotte Cotton will be leading a collecting seminar on Friday, January 9, at 10 a.m.

On Saturday, January 10, she will be hosting the LACMA Free Conversation Series, beginning at noon.

Featured guests include Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman, David Maisel, Bruce Davidson, and Susan Meiselas.



Christopher Russell with *Untitled (wallpaper)*, an UltraChrome print scratched with an X-Acto knife, 24" x 36", 2008. Photos by Michael Shaw.