## ALTMAN SIEGEL

GALLERY S/F

49 GEARY ST, STE. 416 [4th floor] SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94108 tel: 415.576.9300 [ax: 415.373.4471/////ALTMANSIEGEL.COM



They Knew What They Wanted From What Was Available by Chris Fitzpatrick

#### They Knew What They Wanted

Altman Siegel Gallery 49 Geary St., San Francisco, CA 94108 July 1, 2010 - August 7, 2010

"They Knew What They Wanted" invokes something in-between a hit-man's overture and a '50s girl-group's jukebox breakup. But instead the phrase serves as the title of an exhibition that spans four commercial galleries in San Francisco: Altman Siegel, John Berggruen, Fraenkel, and Ratio 3. Each gallery asked a different artist from their roster to select the works from the backrooms, storage shelves, and flat files of all four spaces, yet the results are posited as a single exhibition. While this pretense to incorporeity sits at odds with the distance involved between venues, they are united (however fragilely) by what remains unsold in their inventory. This lends just enough continuity, even if filtered by the

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curators/artists: Robert Bechtle, Shannon Ebner, Katy Grannan, and Jordan Kantor, whose concerns are diverse.

They knew what they wanted from what was available.

Resembling a wanted poster, the collective announcement for the exhibition posits the four organizing artists as fugitive bandits making off with company property, making the "wanted" of the title and the role of the four artists seem more criminal than desirous. Yet it isn't an aesthetic or idea that lends much or really carries on beyond the initial promotional



allure. An overall impression is actually dominated by an abundance of landscapes.

The narrow hours of the collective opening reception did make viewing all four exhibitions something of a fast-paced, hit-and-run affair, but this isn't unusual. San Francisco is a city in which opening receptions and other public programming too often fall on the same dates at the same times, seemingly for no reason. While most galleries in the 49 Geary Street building where two

of the exhibition's exhibitions take place (Altman Siegel and Fraenkel) coordinate their receptions to occur on the first Thursday of each month, the city's overbooking implies an overall lack of communication at best. So it was refreshing to

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see a few galleries collaborating in a coordinated effort not only for the purposes of cross-promotion, but also cross-pollination.

The title "They Knew What They Wanted" may or may not have been lifted from the 1924 play by Sidney Howard (made into a Garson Kanin-directed film in 1940), fitting at least for its San Francisco/Napa Valley locale. A more likely reference would be the cryptic tone invoked by John Ashbery's collage poem of the same title ("They came from beyond space...They only kill their masters...They won't forget"). Yet as the possible references and the wanted poster packaging fades, what strikes loudest is simply the certain strangeness of seeing certain works in certain galleries. Barry McGee's wares seem positively out-of-place in Fraenkel Gallery for example, while Lee Friedlander's well-appointed *Egypt*, 1983, clearly transfixed the crowds at Altman Siegel.

Friedlander's gelatin-silver print depicts lampposts at some remove, then pyramids further in the distance, as well as a sphinx head that is far enough away that scale breaks down until the sphinx almost blends in with the pack of dogs in the foreground. Pyramids are essentially containers and, grappling to make sense of things, containers seemed to provide an initial clue for stumbling through the exhibition at Altman Siegel. For example, there's a steel can, *Can L*, 2005, and an illusionistic water glass, *Water Glass 2*, 2008, by Iran Do Espirito Santo. Just as descriptively titled is *Incubator*, 2009/2010, by Lutz Bacher and *Water Tower, West Paterson, New Jersey, U.S.A.*, 1980, by Bernd and Hilla Becher. However, Ed Ruscha's 2004 lithograph, *Unit*, is the intended point of departure, as Ebner's exhibition was formulated on "the idea that reality is

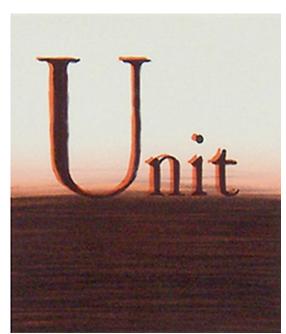
comprised of basic units", and seeks to circumnavigate the "locality of time and place" among other things.

This isn't what Ebner meant, but perhaps one of the reasons "They Knew What They Wanted" is interesting is simply because it cuts through the hyper-locality of the galleries. They're all painted the same color, built out within roughly the same architectural parameters, and share similar lighting (though Ratio 3 wins the award for brightest fluorescents), but they become increasingly local despite these attempts at a standardized-neutrality because they show the same artists over and over on rotation to largely the same clientele. This exhibition brings people in who don't normally go in to see works that normally aren't there.

It was fairly interesting to see works by artists like Will Rogan and Manuel Neri in the same exhibition, as chosen by artist Katy Grannan, but the eclecticism on display at Fraenkel felt like a road-trip through a parade of local heroes. Robert Bechtle's selection at Berggruen had some intriguing photography on display—including four gelatin-silver prints taken in Colorado by Robert Adams, three of Richard Misrach's chromogenic prints of the Golden Gate Bridge at different times and under different light conditions, and two "limit-telephotography" c-prints by Trevor Paglen of Air

Force Flight Test Centers, each taken from a distance of 26 miles. Rather than accentuating their conceptual or formal differences, here, it was nice to compare the extent to which both Misrach and Paglen rely upon and productively exploit the limitations and distortions caused by light and distance in these photographs.

The Ratio 3 exhibition seemed to deliver closest on the wanted theme of the announcement card, with works rousing images, ideas and suggestions of being on the run, surveillance, forensics, disappearance, get-away-cars, and so on. Of course, the gallery has an unfair advantage being located not in Union Square, but in an alley near the Kink.com porn armory and next to a pack of large threatening wolves. Lutz Bacher's nine framed photostatic copies from 1976, *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview*, brings the point home immediately. Paglen's 2008 chromogenic color print, *Parcae Constellation in Draco (Naval Ocean Surveillance System* | USA 160), tracks a spy satellite in orbit. Ed Ruscha's 1969 lithograph *Eye* couldn't be more suggestive in this context, and works by Sara Vanderbeek and Vija Celmins offer added resonances—broken glass, a spider's web. There's stainless steel on and off switches by Rachel Whiteread, Robert Bechtle's 1973 lithograph of a 1971 Caprice (also on display at Fraenkel), and on and on. Most satisfying for thinking along these lines, however, was Eadweard Muybridge's *Adjutant, Flying Run* from 1887. In typically stroboscopic Muybridge fashion, a series of frames depict an adjutant (a type of stork) as it runs. "Adjutant" also means deputy.



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Though occasionally wanting, "They Knew What They Wanted" results in more than the b-side liquidation sale of unwanted leftover stock that summer group shows generally offer. This may be a combined cache of leftovers, but its thoughtful dispersal under the exhibition's humorous conceit makes each work's available status seem all the more opportune, even criminal.

#### - Chris Fitzpatrick

Exhibition takes place at four venues, <u>Ratio 3</u> 1447 Stevenson Street, curated by Jordan Kantor; <u>Altman Siegel Gallery</u> 49 Geary St., curated by Shannon Ebner; <u>John Bergeruen Gallery</u> 228 Grant Ave., curated by Robert Bechtle, and, as mentioned above, <u>Fraenkel Gallery</u> 49 Geary Street, 4th floor, curated by Katy Grannan.

http://www.artslant.com/sf/artists/show/9816-shannon-ebner