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Jo Ann Callis: 'Disk Trick'
Exploring the Psychological Effects of Domesticity
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by Jody Zellen



In *Dish Trick*, Jo Ann Callis presents new configurations of old works. Black and white, as well as color photographs from the 1980s and 1990s, are shown in grids as originally displayed, but also re-printed and presented as single images in new sequences. The works depict everyday objects and domestic settings, yet as seen through Callis' lens they are psychologically charged and unsettling. Departing from traditional still-life set ups, Callis focuses on details and through close focus, transforms banal objects in surreal and unusual ways. In her photographs the ordinary is elevated into something extraordinary.

The exhibition opens with *Domestic Interiors*, a suite of color photographs from 1995 in which Callis fabricated miniature versions of modernist furniture and placed them into dollhouse settings. Brightly colored beds and chairs are set in patterned environments. The framed photographs are surrounded by fabric mats often containing similar patterns. Each square image from this series features a dramatically lit and closely cropped interior. In one untitled work, two twin beds with orange coverings are aligned, but slightly askew in a windowless room. They sit on a gray- and-white striped ground adjacent to pleated pink-red curtains. The mat is a gray-and-white zebra striped pattern. The image becomes a dizzying array of contrasting surfaces and forms.

In the early 1980s, Callis created works featuring multiple black and white photographs. Combined, the images read narratively and together could be seen as Callis' playfully feminist take on domesticity. Incongruous juxtapositions and subtle scale shifts occur in pieces like *Still Life with Ice* (1981-83) and *Still Life with Fish [sliced bread, glass of water, tablecloth, beet, sardines]* (1981-83). *Still Life with Fish* includes five images: sliced bread on a tiled counter; a bowl of water with a dragonfly resting on its edge sitting on top of newspaper classified ads; the corner of a table with a striped tablecloth; a dish filled with numerous sardines; as well as an actual table-top still life containing a ball of twine, a folded newspaper and a selection of fruits and vegetables.

Still Life with Ice also juxtaposes five photographs; four depicting single objects and the fifth with related kitchen items in combination. One of the images features a sharp knife

at the end of a table, another a block of ice on a vinyl tablecloth, the third a wooden straight-backed chair against a wall, the fourth picture is a glass of water with a spoon in it. The final image of five items on a table includes a different knife, a glass of milk, an empty bowl, a folded black towel and a giant block of ice that has begun to melt. The placement of similar objects in this final image begins to suggest relationships between the elements of the other photographs. Callis remarks that the picture evokes the feeling that something is about to happen.

Callis enjoys playing with illusions and creating relationships between disparate things. *Cake, Hat, Pillow* (1982) is a triptych where each object is photographed from above. While the cake, hat and pillow are centered in the frame, Callis includes the edge of the table, as well as the wall behind it in every image. This turns the background into a striped abstraction. *The Dish Trick* (1985) is a color photograph that captures a moment of aggression. It depicts dishes hovering at the edge of a table as the cloth below them is being yanked away. The traditional table-setting is disrupted, the chairs misaligned as a headless figure pulls the yellow-white tablecloth away. In magic acts, the tablecloth stunt is a phenomenon where the cloth is pulled out from under the dishes and none break. In Callis' image, it is quite evident that the trick will not be a success.

The exhibition is a mix of old and new prints, and it is interesting to compare Callis' original sequences to the new modest sized prints (8 x 10 and 8 x 12 inches). Here, photographs of individual, everyday objects are mounted to aluminum and covered with a matte laminate and framed. Alone, the objects are ambiguous anomalies and devoid of context. Connections are now made between the sequence of images on the wall, rather than within a single frame. Callis invigorates banal, everyday things by photographing them straight on, presenting them larger than life and emphasizing their beauty and strange familiarity in shades of gray. In most painted and photographic still lifes the objects are presented in exacting detail and in vivid color. One of Callis' intentions with these pieces was to deconstruct the still life genre, so the fact that these images are black and white makes sense.

Throughout her career, Callis has created domestic tableaux of household objects through individual black and white, as well as color photographs. She explores the psychological aspects of domesticity by making quasi-erotic, seductive, contemplative and often surreal images. Seeing old works in a new context serves as a reminder of how of the moment she was – and continues – to be.

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