

REVIEW

Burning Down the House: Ellen Brooks, Jo Ann Callis, Eileen Cowin

PASADENA MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA ART
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Burning Down the House is an exhibition of photographic works by Ellen Brooks, Jo Ann Callis, and Eileen Cowin. Curators Claudia Bohn-Spector and Sam Mellon brought the work of these women together in part because all three began their careers in Los Angeles (in actuality, Cowin began her career on the East Coast and moved to Los Angeles to teach in the 1970s). It seems that the work is less about the specifics of the city, however, than the desire to push against traditional as well as experimental modes of photographic representation that were taught and practiced in LA in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These women turned inward and constructed narratives for the camera that explored memory, desire, and contemporary culture from a feminine and feminist point of view.

"Burning Down the House" is the title of a popular 1983 Talking Heads song about taking a stand against convention and doing something out of the ordinary; the song's lyrics advocate "Fighting fire with fire" but declare "Watch out, you might get what you're after." The curators posit that these three photographers, each in her own way, set new precedent for what could happen within the photographic discourse at the time and into the future. In the 1970s, Brooks began creating tabletop scenarios about relationships using dolls, Callis brought ideas from surrealism into her colored imagery, and Cowin staged open-ended narratives. Rather than

document the observable world, these women drilled into the recesses of their memories, imaginations, and experiences to find a way to express what was in their thoughts but had not yet been committed to film.

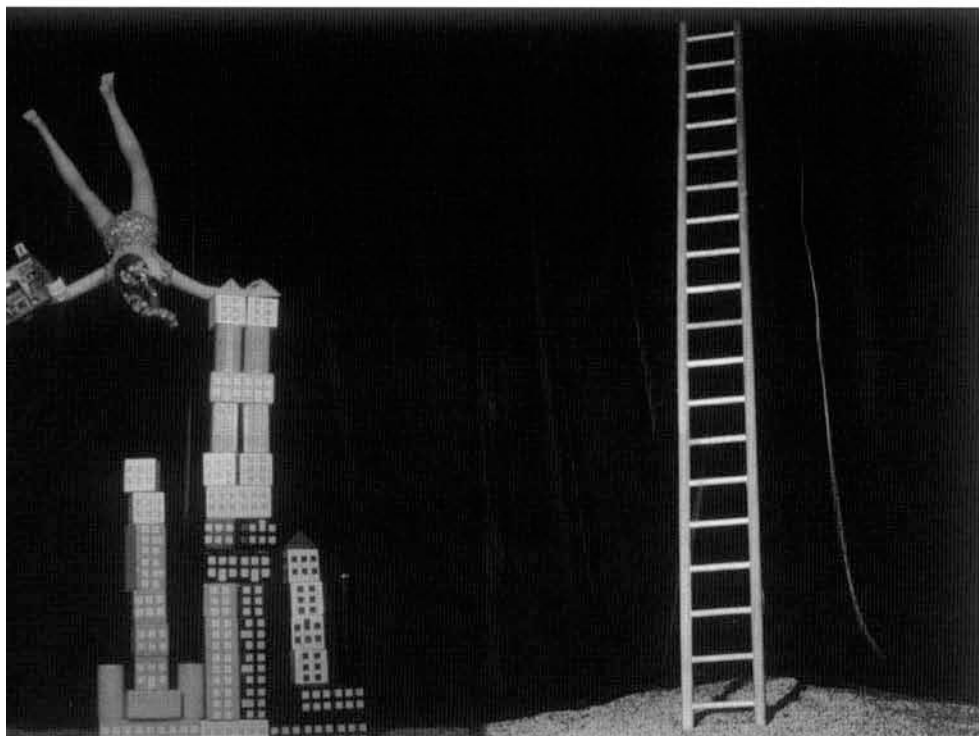
Works by each artist are interspersed on the gallery walls, suggesting similarities in themes and methods of working. Through this juxtaposition, new relationships are formed and an interesting dialogue created among the works that may not have existed between the artists at the time. Narrative is at the core of each artist's investigation, as well as questions about how the photographic medium can be used to tell stories.

Cowin's works in many ways appear to be the most straightforward, yet appearances can be deceiving. Her carefully composed and exquisitely lit color images suggest all sorts of interrelationships between people, places, and things. Through a gesture or a glance, Cowin crafts a narrative that takes its cues from film, art history, and traditional storytelling about what might have or could have happened to the protagonists. In *Adam and Eve (after Van Eyck)* (1991), a man appears to be groped by the disembodied hands of a woman, perhaps belonging to the female on the right side of the diptych. Neither figure looks at the other, as the moment of "shame" has passed, leaving each engrossed in their own thoughts. *I'll Give You Something to Cry About* (1998) is a twelve-part grid of tightly cropped image fragments. The scenario unfolds by reading the images from left to right and from top to bottom. Evidence of a painful relationship is presented through these fragments, al-

lowing the viewer to construct their own story from the images, as suggested by the work's title. Cowin's earliest pieces in the exhibition are from the series *One Night Stand* (1977–78). Here she alludes to an encounter between a man and woman, who are depicted in various stages of undress in Polaroid images left on a nightstand and the corner of a bed. Cowin often has pictures within pictures in her compositions, using them as clues to what may have transpired. Cowin's work does not directly empower the woman, nor does it implicate the man. Her stories are open-ended fantasies that rely on the viewer to fill in the blanks.

Positioning actors and constructing scenarios for the camera went against the grain of the documentary paradigm in photography that was focused on framing reality and creating photographic truths. Cowin's, Callis's, and Brooks's intentions were not to debunk photographic practices, but to embrace them, while examining emotional as well as psychological truths via the camera.

Balancer from the series *Tableaux* (1978–85) by Ellen Brooks; © Ellen Brooks; courtesy the artist



Their methods were more in line with early conceptual photography, though their goals were markedly different.

Brooks took the directing of actors out of her process and began to stage scenarios using dolls as stand-ins for their human counterparts. She created carefully crafted stage sets in which she would pose plastic figures—often in ways that real people could not be positioned—in order to explore relationships and gender stereotypes. In this exhibition, Brooks is represented by images made between 1978 and 1985, collectively titled *Tableaux*. Brooks's images are witty, cutting, and ironic. Some, like *Kitchen Table* and *Shadow Dance* (both 1980), take their cues from film noir, depicting isolated individuals in dramatically lit domestic spaces, while in others, scantily clad Barbie and Ken dolls with big hair and well-proportioned bodies are placed in risqué poses and scenes. In the diptych *Balancer* (1982), a woman wearing a sequined leotard has one hand precariously perched atop an unstable tower made from blocks, positioned in front of a deep blue velvet curtain. This is juxtaposed with an image of a wooden ladder leaning against the same velvet curtain, setting up a possible sequence of events: woman climbs ladder and falls—or jumps to her death—without offering a conclusion. By staging psychodramas for the camera, Brooks created fictitious narratives based on memory and observation of the dynamics and complexities of relationships between men and women.

If Cowin is the realist and Brooks the inventor, then Callis is the surrealist. Her works are as much about what is impossible as what could happen. Callis plays with foreground/background relationships in images such as *Woman Twirling* and *Man and Plant* (both 1985). In these two photographs, the figure is purposely out of focus, caught in the midst of an action—woman twirling, man laughing and throwing his head from side to side. Both images are shot in what appears to be a domestic space, the subject's restlessness suggesting a need to escape. The desire to obfuscate domestic space and motherly roles was paramount for Callis at this time. In *Dish Trick* (1985), dishes are caught in mid-flight as a yellow tablecloth beneath them is yanked away by an unidentified person. The gesture, a purposefully destructive



Hands on Ankles (1976–77) by Jo Ann Callis; © Jo Ann Callis; courtesy the artist/Rose Gallery

act, clearly illustrates the need to “burn down the house.” While Callis also posed models within homey spaces, she often focused on the objects that surrounded her sitters or the actions those sitters performed. She was less interested in the relationships between people than in how she could capture a moment crafted for the camera to record. Callis's images are softly focused, warm, and seductive. They exude mystery, while also telling the story of frustrated housewives pushing at the boundaries of their situations.

What is significant about this exhibition is not the specifics of the works on view, which comprise a small selection from long careers, but the way they reveal how three different approaches to imagemaking that began in the 1970s continue to push boundaries to this day. Perhaps under-recognized as innovators who challenged the conventions of the male-dominated world of photography by asserting a feminine and feminist voice, Cowin, Callis, and Brooks should be recognized for their aesthetic, conceptual, and technical savvy at a time when few women were pushing conventions. The works on view are examples of the kind of work that catapulted these artists into the limelight. They were not necessarily interested in burning down the house, but in turning the house upside down and letting whatever was inside out, in order to carve new paths for women working in photography.

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I'll Give You Something to Cry About (1998) by Eileen Cowin; © Eileen Cowin; courtesy the artist

