

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Selected Affinities

Christopher Grimes Gallery
Santa Monica, California
June 23–August 31, 2018

Selected Affinities is a group exhibition that focuses on attitudes toward the cultural and physical landscape, ranging from issues of preservation to globalization, and features color photographs by Allan Sekula, Miles Coolidge, Connie Samaras, and Katie Shapiro, as well as a short black-and-white film by Billy Woodberry. Each of the participating Los Angeles-based artists has an expansive body of work, so it is a bit disappointing that Coolidge, Samaras, and Shapiro are each represented by just three images culled from a greater whole. This may leave some viewers curious and wanting more. In many ways, the exhibition pays homage to Sekula (1951–2013), an influential mentor, teacher, and colleague to those active in the academic faction of the Los Angeles photo community. Another curious aspect of the exhibition is the fact that the works date from 1992 to 2015, situating the exhibition in the recent past rather than the present.

The pivotal work in the show is Sekula's *Message in a Bottle* (from *Fish Story, Chapter 5*) (first version), an excerpt from his *Fish Story* (1992/94), a photographic artwork and accompanying book comprised of nearly one hundred images that document maritime spaces and the effects of the globalization of labor. The eight color images and two text panels that comprise *Message in a Bottle* have a less commanding presence than the other, larger, photographs by the other artists in the exhibition. Coolidge is represented by works from his *Mattawa* series (2000), in which the artist documented temporary housing for migrant workers that was created from converted shipping containers. In *Mattawa*, Washington, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "the county housing authority is coordinating a \$323,000 project to use big shipping containers—the type seen stacked up on the docks in Seattle—to create bunkhouses. The steel containers will be outfitted with plumbing, air conditioning and heating systems.¹ In Coolidge's characteristic, people-less depictions, the makeshift shelters frame the distant landscape and irrigation machines. The buildings are connected to each other through both grass and concrete pathways. The triangular shaped roofs of the structures parallel the shapes of the irrigation machines

Message in a Bottle (from *Fish Story, Chapter 5*) (first version) (1992/1994) by Allan Sekula; courtesy Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, CA





Mattawa #2 (2000) by Miles Coolidge; courtesy the artist and Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

and create a formal mirroring. These images, shot in a straightforward and detached style similar to Bernd and Hilla Becher (with whom Coolidge studied) and August Sander, convey the barren nature of the structures. Though they function as housing, they remain generic, portable buildings that do not evoke the quality of home.

In her similarly unpopulated series *Malibu Sandbags* (2010), Shapiro photographed beachfront properties threatened by erosion and the different ways homeowners configure barriers to protect their property in an exclusive oceanfront stretch in Malibu. It is curious that both Coolidge and Shapiro are making work about social relations without depicting human beings. Shapiro's color photographs, mostly taken on blue-sky days, feature a kind of ad-hoc bunker architecture created to save properties from the effects of nature as well as keep undesirables away. Sandbags are piled as odd-shaped bunkers paralleling the shoreline atop burlap cloths holding the sand in place. While there are hints of deck chairs and palm trees, these people-less photographs mask the valuable properties behind the dunes. *Malibu Sandbags #12* depicts stacks of weathered sandbags in the lower half of the composition appearing as a wall that blocks the view of the ocean and horizon. The condition of the sandbags alludes to a place of danger rather than an idyllic sea setting.

Samaras is widely respected in Los Angeles as an artist and educator who works in a range of media. She is an artist with a

committed agenda, and the three pictures on view from the body of work *After the American Century* (2008–9) showcase the visual and social contradictions evident in the development of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Samaras photographed there in 2008 and 2009, and her photographs of this desert city in transition document ironic juxtapositions of new and old, rich and poor, and natural and artificial (with respect to the landscape). *After the American Century, Workers Checking Fountain Nozzles, 1* (2009) is a photograph of workers in a glorious aqua-colored expanse of water that is clearly not natural to the environment. The image captures the range of styles of nouvelle architecture set against the blue water—clearly things not endemic to the desert. Samaras presents Dubai as a place of potential excess, designed to be a futuristic paradise whose development is codependent on the financial success of the wealthy ruling class.

Woodberry's single-channel video *Marseille Après la Guerre* (2015, 10 min. 30 sec.) is a work created from black-and-white still photographs culled from the National Maritime Union Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University. Woodberry happened upon a collection of photographs depicting dockworkers in the city of Marseille just after World War II that reminded him of the work of the African filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, who in 1948 worked on the docks of Marseille. Woodberry narrates and then pans through the images focusing on different individuals, structuring implied relationships between the white and black workers and their bosses through his framing and editing. The video elegantly moves between close-ups and distance shots, which are seen in relation to a soundtrack that juxtaposes music by the group Moussu Te lei Jovents, whose sound is a mélange inspired by the blues, cabaret, and chansons prevalent in Marseille in the 1920s and '30s, with snippets of clanging and banging sounds from the docks. Woodberry's video masterfully fuses photographic fragments with spoken text, music, and ambient sounds to create an evocative and beautiful narrative work that is a portrait of a bygone era.

Selected Affinities is an intriguing exhibition presenting the work of four photographers and one filmmaker, all of whom live(d) and work(ed) in Los Angeles. It is possible to trace the linkages between these artists. Sekula taught, and Woodberry now teaches, at the California Institute of the Arts; Coolidge was a student there; Samaras taught and Coolidge now teaches at the University of California, Irvine; and Shapiro attended both CalArts and UCI. These relationships in themselves do not make for an interesting show. It is the fact that each artist is invested in documentary photography and social relations that ties their practices together. Gallery shows do not often have the luxury of large spaces that museums can offer, and *Selected Affinities* would benefit from expansion. Three works or a single excerpt from a larger series whet the appetite, but are in no way a full meal, so the viewer is left wanting more. The exhibition begins to create an interesting conversation among artists whose works and ideologies are linked in unusual and sophisticated ways. It is fortunate that it leaves us wanting more and unfortunate that more is not a possibility.

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NOTE 1. Linda Ashton and Hal Spencer, "Cargo Containers Are Considered to House Migrant Farm Workers," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1999, <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/apr/18/local/me-28548>.