LA Times Sunday Calendar
November 16, 1992
pp 9, 88, 84

Let's Get Small

Judy Fiskin makes big statements with her distinctive Minimalist works, using her camera to transform the seemingly banal into tiny images that startle

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

Judy Fiskin does not live in a dingbat.

Nor does she live in a stucco box. Although such vernacular forms of Southern California architecture have often been the subject of her photographs, Fiskin lives in a respectable Spanish-style West L.A. house that once belonged to that avuncular character actor Guy Kibbee.

Inside, the walls and sofas are very white, the tables made of warm, blond wood, the floors of red tile. Very tidy. She introduces her husband, Jon Wiener, UC Irvine professor of history and contributing editor to the Nation, who has gained notoriety for working with the American Civil Liberties Union to successfully sue the FBI for the release of its files on John Lennon.

As the tour of the house continues, it appears that Fiskin's own photographs are not in evidence. Instead, there are works, all in black and white, by artists who were still students when she taught at CalArts: Cindy Bernard, Jill Giegerich and Mike Kelley. Fiskin points to a small photogram of a pattern of white sugar cubes on a black background, the creation of Edouard Steichen as a commission for the Stelhi Silk Co. "This is my favorite piece," she says.

This makes sense. Fiskin's own photographs are uniformly black and white and small scale, and often concern the dissolution of boundaries between art that is classified as high or low, craft or decoration, professional or hobbyist. She leads the way to her darkroom, adjacent to the kitchen, and with a mysterious smile announces: "The house is the ego, the darkroom is the id."

It is at least a contrast. Every inch of wall space is plastered with pictures torn from magazines and books: a Louis XIV salon, illustrations of 18th-Century moldings, Victorian hats, tribal sculpture and Malevich paintings. A pile of proof sheets loosely stacked on the enlarger is evidence of her own work, which is in a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art through Dec. 6: "Judy Fiskin: Some Photographs, 1973-1992." The exhibition, organized by Ann Goldstein, is part of MOCA's "Focus" series on discrete bodies of work by individual artists.

Like Ed Ruscha, who photographed every building on the Sunset Strip, and Alexis Smith, who transformed B-grade movie posters into art, Fiskin triumphs in bringing the undervalued aesthetics of Southern California into the spotlight. By presenting subject matter that many would call banal—from the ranch houses of San Bernardino to anonymous paintings at a county fair—in a tiny but compelling format, she invites viewers to stop, focus and wonder.

In a politely subversive manner that seems very much in keeping with her personality, she has become an invaluable addition to the roster of artists important to the developing history of art on the West Coast. Her latest work takes on the very institution of art history, tacitly questioning how some aesthetic decisions become masterpieces and others wind up at the swap meet.

Fiskin, 47, has the complexion and profile of a Fragonard woman, but she is outfitted in a practical black cotton shirt and slacks. She rummages through a file drawer and finds six photographs taken in the last year for her most recent series, "More Art." Like most of the photographs of the last two decades, they are black and white and approximately 2¾ inches square. One of the most arresting is the profile of a heavyset man with a five o'clock shadow, his golden locks piled in an implausibly tall hairstyle. It is impossible to tell if he is living or dead, though he looks vaguely familiar. It turns out to be a wax effigy of Louis XIV.

"More Art" also includes photographs of a rounded sofa from a Sheraton pattern book, a sandpaper painting of George Washington's tomb and a painting of a sailing ship in an elaborate frame made entirely of rope knots. These disparate pictures are linked by the fact that they were all photographed out of books, which is a departure for Fiskin.

"When I'm photographing from books, it's not appropriation. I'm interested in and believe in the power of photographic transformation," she says. "Even though it sounds unlikely, when I photographed that Louis XIV, if I showed you the book it came from, it really looks different and takes on a different life in the square format.

"One of the things that got me started on photographing art," she continues, "was going back to those books of [Constantin] Bran-

Please see Page 88

JOSE GALVEZ / Los Angeles Times

The artist, above, and her photograph of a wax effigy of Louis XIV in the Musée Grévin, Paris (1991), reproduced in the same format as in her MOCA show "Some Photographs."

Judy Fiskin

Continued from Page 9

cusi's photographs of his own work. I actually like the photographs of the sculpture better than I like the sculpture. Those photographs are different from the work. Not the same as his sculptural world or his studio in the Beaubourg.

"That's a genre of image in itself, reproductions," she says. "So it's like full circle for me, starting in art history and circling back to photographing in books. It's also why I quit being an art historian. I realized, as soon as I got into graduate school, I didn't want to read or write about these things, I just wanted to look at them."

Fiskin, a native of West L.A., received her bachelor's degree in art history from Pomona College and after a brief stint in medieval art at UC Berkeley finished her master's degree in 20th-Century art history at UCLA in 1969. The defining moment of her study there took place in a class taught by Kurt von Meier. Art dealer Fred Hoffman, art critic Merle Schipper and CalArts Provost Beverly O'Neill were in the same class. Von Meier's unconventional approach included taking students to the airport, where they would watch planes take off, or telling them to buy inexpensive TVs to throw off the end of the Santa Monica Pier.

"In order to get us to think about how conventional symbols were used in popular culture," Fiskin recalls, "he assigned us each a symbol—mine was the heart—and had us get cameras. This is after six or seven years of art history and all this input of looking at images. I held the camera up to my face for the first time and thought, 'This is for me!' I think all that art history was that I really wanted to be an artist and didn't know how. The minute I held up that camera, I realized I could."

Fiskin was soon photographing views of San Bernardino, military architecture, stucco and dingbats. It was a time when the aesthetics and theories of Minimalism held sway.

But it was only recently that she realized she was actually photographing Minimalist boxes. "Now that I look back, especially at the military architecture, that's nothing but Minimal art." Yet she was reducing the massive architecture to a diminutive scale, domesticating what was praised for its defiantly expansive scale.

Fiskin tells an anecdote that encapsules some recent revelations: "I was showing my work to [photographer] John Divola's students at UC Riverside and saying that I photograph architecture as if it were sculpture, which is what I had thought for a long time. John, who is a really smart guy, said, 'No, you photograph as if it were pictures of sculpture.' Now *pictures* of sculpture changes the scale. But it's back to the same thing. What I really liked was looking at pictures. I like looking at art, but I really like looking at pictures."

Around 1979, Fiskin says, she "got tired of shooting rectangles." She wanted her 35-millimeter camera modified to shoot a small, square format.

"I took it to this camera repair guy and he wouldn't do it, because he didn't think that I understood the implications of what I was asking for," she explains with practiced exasperation. "So I went back and he still wouldn't do it. The third time I brought a man with me and they had a discussion. The guy said, 'Does she understand what's going to happen?' My friend said, 'Yes.' And so he put two metal flanges on the shutter curtain so that only a square piece of film gets exposed. He was also able to block off the mirror, so when I look through the viewfinder I see what I'm going to photograph."

In 1984, Fiskin began a groundbreaking series on the decorative arts called "Some Aesthetic Decisions." She photographed amateur and student art, kitsch and craft, culminating in the exacting and compulsive world of competition flower arranging.

"That subject matter had something to do with a woman's place in the world," she explains. "The settings [of the arrangements] are very stark and minimal, but a lot of those photographs were taken in Palos Verdes, which is completely upper middle class. For me, it was like this perfect vision of how women, before the women's movement, were stunted in their ambitions. It looked like art—some of them told me they considered it to be sculpture—but it lacked all the freedom of art. I saw it as women with lots of energy and ambition who had never been allowed to play that out. It was scary for me because I came of age at the same time as the woman's movement and I'm not sure my life would have been any different from theirs if it hadn't been for that."

The 1991 series "Some Art & Some Furniture" includes stylized furniture settings at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

"If you are talking about kitsch or decorative arts, they are both situations that are sort of demeaned," Fiskin says. "I don't photograph Shaker furniture. I photograph things that I call 'hysterical,' like Rococo furniture. We've been educated to see that as fine craft. If you just look at it, it's completely nuts. I can't operate in something that's aesthetically tasteful or complete."

Fiskin is photographing more than "aesthetic decisions," however. She is simultaneously documenting codes of taste as defined by class. "Taste is one of the ways that classes are defined," she says. "Taste has to do with how do we make meaning. As in the flower arrangements, everybody knows their own class code. I'm not a Postmodernist in the sense that I believe there is no meaning, no history, and that everything is a

Please see Page 89

text. But I do believe that meaning slips and slides. I think really what I'm doing is picking at my own rigidity and the fear that lies under that. And that gets a little scary because there is a security in having your belief system all wrapped up like that."

Critics have accused Fiskin of taking a moral position, but the artist disagrees: "People see my work as a sort of rescue mission [for the decorative arts and crafts]. But I don't believe in that hierarchy [of decorative versus fine arts]. Why rescue it? It's better off in a sense where it is. There is a freedom to it there.

"One of the things about finding the wildest examples is that, for me, it's a picture of people who aren't constrained by my particular set of aesthetic restraints."

Fiskin recalls a picture of a flower arrangement of raffia, spiky, thorny plants and a tiki—"It was in the dried-materials category and it was demonic." She says: "Here is someone who is doing all this stuff that I would consider bad taste, but it's a lot of fun. It's a picture of freedom.

"It's about innocence, my loss of innocence, and how you try to get some of that pleasure back." □

Hunter Drohojowska is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis/Parsons School of Art and Design.