

PHOTOGRAPHY

Material and information about photography should be sent to ARTWEEK Photography Editor Joan Murray, 120 Blair Avenue, Piedmont, CA 94611.

SLIDES AND ANECDOTES IN SEMINAR

Los Angeles / L. Hunter Drohojowska

On February 3, G. Ray Hawkins Gallery held a workshop, *Understanding Contemporary Photography*, at the Pacific Design Center. Close to 200 people came to the Milk-of-Magnesia blue glass complex to listen to photographers Jo Ann Callis, William Giles, Gary Winogrand and Judy Dater, as well as *Picture* magazine editor Don Owens and photography's leading historian, Beaumont Newhall.

The workshop was primarily a promotion for the Hawkins Gallery, where Newhall was opening that same evening a rare exhibit of his own photographs. All of the participating artists are carried by Hawkins, and the prices of their work were printed on the program without a tinge of embarrassment. In spite of the strong commercial slant, the seminar presented a fine opportunity to see slides of some exciting work and to question the artists on their methods and madneses. Ironically, only a few audience members were awake or sophisticated enough to make relevant inquiries, and the body of questioning too often sank to the level of "How did you get so close to the subject?"

The day opened with slides of work from *Picture* magazine, Owens' self-described "gallery in magazine form..." Owens started *Picture* three years ago in reaction to Minor White's "Inbred" group at *Aperture*. He refused to accept White's premise that a high quality photography magazine could not be self-supporting, and behold, *Picture* is now breaking-even financially without advertising or the \$100 donation that *Aperture* requests. Owens said that he chooses the prints to be published in an intuitive and visceral way, feeling an image rather than analyzing its technical merits.

Callis is very active in the L.A. area at the moment, having most recently shown at Security Pacific Bank. (See ARTWEEK, January 27.) She works the precarious balance of ecstasy and pain, capturing frigid, anonymous persons in suggestive situations, richly hued but as untouchable as plastic fruit. Occasionally, she slips into a facile solution reminiscent of Helmut Newton, but more often her work is a parody of fashion and its eerie false environments. She noted that she purposely introduces threatening elements to offset the beauty of her work.

Giles showed a five-part slide presentation titled *Transformations* coordinated with background music edited by David Tate. The slides, black and white studies of the patterns and textures of nature, segued into one another or superimposed themselves to create additional layered images. With a remarkable control of light and shadow, the interchanging positive and negative areas were at times enigmatic, at times frankly beautiful. The atonal rhythms of Tibetan bells or Gregorian chants worked well, but the more melodic tunes were decidedly saccharine, even irritating. Indeed, Giles' work treads dangerously close to Sierra Club sentimental. Certain restraint is in evidence, but perhaps a bit more is needed.

After a lunch break, Winogrand provided a much needed injection of pure, eccentric energy. Professional and impatient, Winogrand's sardonic humor flattened a few of the audience, but he was also a most informative and pertinent speaker. His tough, wry, black and white photographs spanned the last twenty-five years. In response to the query as to whether he felt visually more sophisticated now, he said, "I try more things, and the more I try, the more I try." He told an anecdote of a grandmother who was wheeling her grandchild through the park in a baby carriage when a man approached and began raving about the child's beauty. The grandmother interrupted him to say, "Stop, stop!! If you think *that's* something, you should see his picture!" Photographs have that intrinsic failure. Contrary to what we think, they do not have a narrative ability. The viewer actually doesn't know what a photograph is about, even though he or she has most of the visual information. This is especially true of Winogrand's ambiguous work. He mentioned that a photographically interesting piece for him is a problem stated but not fully resolved. Conflict is more esthetically intriguing than homogeny.

Although best known for her black and white view-camera portraits of women, Dater has been mostly photographing men for several years. Her

male nudes are riveting, swollen with some repressed significance. Their disturbing quality is not a function of mere oddity, regardless of the few studies of naked men that one sees. She has sunk deep into her models' feelings about being immortalized in the buff — inevitably a highly personal pursuit. Dater is presently doing a book of interviews with various associates of her friend, the late Imogen Cunningham.

It has always been suspected that the founder of the history of photography should be a shutterbug, but until last year the images recorded by Newhall hadn't been released. It was touching then to hear the pundit Newhall speak of his own work with a mixture of insecurity and affection. He recounted the scraps and folds of memory as they were attached to his various pictures and never retreated to the safe jargon of history. "I like this picture," he said guilelessly. He admitted to the influence of friends Edward Weston and Paul Strand and noted an ongoing interest in "pictures that have a framework, that hold together." Some of his imagery is weak and unimaginative, but all his photographs reflect the man's lifetime devotion to photography as an art form. □