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## **Painting and Enigma: the Photographs of Horst Stein**

By D.F. Colman

Horst Stein's photographs teasingly depict the displaying of paintings (either outdoors or indoors). These are seductive images formally and philosophically. The artist's institutional critique touches upon (perhaps unwittingly or ironically, it is hard to say) the ghost of commodity fetishism that circulates in today's overheated market-driven art world, its main international art fairs and major cities, such as New York, Miami, Cologne, Berlin, London, Beijing and London.

Clearly, Stein is hardly giving us images drawn from such art scenes in which connoisseurs and collectors navigate amongst other cognoscenti in fashionable city centers to buy, speculate upon or discuss the role and place of art as essential luxury goods which demarcates of the high social status of the rich and educated elite. Instead, through his framing of unprepossessing paintings in the company of seemingly unsophisticated onlookers who are posing in what might charitably be described as unceremonious and often quite prosaic conditions (which are, naturally, antithetical to the proper viewing or appreciating of artworks) Stein creates thought provoking and bemused imagery. His unclipped photographic situations address the unspoken premise that looms large in the art world: that of a higher and higher access and prestige leading to ever escalating cultural (and therefore monetary) capital. His works allow a series of propositions to unravel: who (artist, gallerist, collector, museum curator) gets what (painting, photograph, video, sculpture, installation) seen in which correct (or incorrect) environment and context.

Furthermore, Stein's nimble photographs have a social edge as well in terms of asking who is the "great public" out there that "great" artwork presumably talks (often down) to? Issues of conspicuous consumption (or lack thereof), visual literacy (or lack thereof) and concomitant references to social status permeate Stein's imagery lending it a rapier wit. The style occurs through what appears to be Stein's visual ideology. In presenting images (photos) of images (paintings) in awkward social space with remarkable economy and directness of means the artist's works allows us to speculate or examine the way that his photographic images makes us see the scenes his pictures represent.

In essence Stein's imagery isn't invested so much in making us aware of the pictorial (that is narratological elements within the paintings themselves, that is the curious fish scenes in the Stranded Series photographs in which we see paintings whose subjects refer to mythological space and time) elements that he has painted nor the spaces in which they occupy as much as he is invested in touching upon a new seam of content. This enlarged scope opens up a conversation about art itself being seen and evaluated as cultural capital, which inexorably involves a process of production, presentation and distribution. And yet, there is more at stake here than an implication on the part of Stein that he is observing the limits of interpretation as it relates to historical materialism. He is also through his photographic depictions of paintings in the process of being looked upon by the social bringing into sharp focus his mixed intentionalities that are the calling into consciousness the act of painting and the act of seeing. His photos paradoxically revolve around the phenomenon of presence or aura that all painting possesses by virtue of it being intended to exist as a unique image in the world made by hand at one point in time by one artist. Stein raises questions on the broad humanistic relevance of art-making through its capacity to invoke change (even modest change) through visibility's

claim of being a “universal language” that speaks to everyone no matter what age or social class.

There is to be sure a latent element of wry skepticism that rests within these works; and it is this knowingness on the part of the artist that elevates his images. It carries them beyond the realm of social realism or narrative photography and into a speculative realm of the imagination. This element of wit can be seen in the way that the artist indicates that the claims of the traditional “fine” arts such as painting and sculpture may be specious indeed. In his photographs Stein depicts not appreciative or uplifted beholders of his painterly talents, but rather the opposite. A type of befuddlement, or boredom seems to be the response on the part of the viewers who inhabit the space of the paintings’ sites. This sort of disenchantment seems to be deliberately built into Stein’s photographic ideology; it is after all what he is after: an uncomfortable sensation on the part of the viewer that what we are witnessing as viewers of his photographs is a disconnect between people, between people and art images, and between the photographer/painter and the subjects he is portraying. The paintings we see in the photographs, that are so balefully appreciated by seemingly unknowing or unsophisticated viewers, are the works of the painter who then is photographing their interface with neighborhood friends or family members. This assumption is drawn from the look of familiarity which pervades Stein’s imagery. Yes, the photographs’ tableaux are more likely than not staged; yet the people who were recruited as stand-ins for the “masses” were not, one can conjecture, strangers (or at least do not appear to be so). Yet, of course, one of the reasons for the vitality and charm which sustains Stein’s photo works lies in the fact that there is an irresolvableness and an inconclusiveness, both, which reside within his staged photographs. These two conditions in a manner of speaking are perhaps the most noticeable “actors” in Stein’s mis-en-scenes.

That is not, of course, to say that the pictorial facets of either the context in which the painterly images are placed (kitchen, courtyard) or the subject matters themselves are devoid, inherently, of signification. In fact, quite the opposite holds true: namely, that we can identify and relate to Stein’s artworks (that is the photograph proper) because he has so masterfully implicated the narrative structure and texture within the paintings themselves within the code of the photograph. The imagistic cunning of Stein’s photographs depends on his holding in suspension for us as viewers the implication that a work of art (be it painting or photography or a photograph of a painting) is both subject to the conditions under which it is made (produced, exchanged, presented, distributed) and that, moreover, the artwork, on another level, defies those very conditions. It is this impossible admixture which elevates cultural labor into an artwork.

In other words, there is both more and less than meets the eye in Horst Stein’s images and imagery. Max Raphael in his study *The Struggle to Understand Art and Towards an Empirical Theory of Art* (1941) makes this dual process clear when he writes “Art is an interplay, an equation of three factors - the artist, the world and the means of figuration ... a work of art [is] always a synthesis between nature (or history) and the mind, and as such it acquires a certain autonomy vis-vis both these elements...” Stein has strategically incorporated references to the making of paintings and the recording of such works through another realm of image making (photography) and in so doing brings home the material and immaterial character of the representational image. Moreover, Horst Stein’s photographs are beguiling, as we cannot pigeonhole them as readily as we might think we can or might want to. The enigmatic aspect of Stein’s imagery rests on an important consideration. The photographer has effectively dismantled the category of art “families” or “genres” and “styles” within those families. Such categorical certainties might in an earlier part of the last century have been functional but are no longer in play today. It is hard to say whether Stein’s imagery falls into the camp of documentary photography, portrait photography, social realism, camp, storytelling photography or blends of all of these. In conclusion, one might say that as certainty in postmodernism is not

an appreciated value, it is the uncertainty principle in Horst Stein's photographs that sustains their credibility and viability as cultural works of a high order.