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Exhibitions evoke signs of ruin, scars of war

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San Francisco photographer Katherine Westerhout has specialized in views of modern urban ruins. This preoccupation continues in "Detroit," a series of recent pictures at Electric Works.



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Westerhout contemplates the process whereby physical details add up to social facts, forcing us to recognize in abandoned real estate an unacknowledged abandonment of ideals and consensus.

The sense of abandonment dawns slowly in "Capitol Theater, Flint, I" (2007) and "Aquarium, Belle Isle, I" (2007), where the signs of ruin stand at a distance. In these images and a couple of others, Westerhout's interest in the play of color, light and space almost eclipses the dreary import of her subject matter.

In others, such as "Packard Plant" (2007), with its shattered, graffiti-sprayed, lunch counter, and the eerie, empty tank of "Aquarium, Belle Isle, II" (2007), neglect and the atmosphere of despair it produces come forward as the true subjects.

Viewers will wonder how Westerhout got an apparently frontal view of the mirrored wall in "Packard Plant" without the camera's reflection showing.

Rising awareness of the mismanagement of American industry and labor relations, amplified by current anxiety over the social toll of anarchic financial speculation, heighten the elegiac intensity of Westerhout's images.

These considerations can also complicate viewer responses to her work. For if we accept that a deceptive regime of images in some measure accounts for the desolation that Westerhout autopsies, then we have to wonder about her medium's complicity, as well as her own, in that regime, good intentions aside.

Considering what we think we know, what does it mean to enjoy the undeniable beauty of Westerhout's photographs?

Should we see them as offering consolation, or a kind of redemptive aesthetic stance toward the realities implicit in them? Or is absorption in them finally no better than absorption in the visual spectacles offered to us as compensation for a foxed and crumbling social contract?

That it forces such questions to mind makes Westerhout's work exemplary in an uncomfortable way and necessary to see.

Photo sculpture at Camerawork: The complex projects of Japanese artist Katsushige Nakahashi at San Francisco Camerawork display an approach to photography and public memory very different from Westerhout's.

The 40-foot mural "On the Day 7th December, 2006/ Battleship Missouri, Pearl Harbor" (2006-07) hangs like a tattered curtain, 5,000-odd small prints loosely composing a single image.

To make it, Nakahashi spent the 65th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, sunrise to sunset, photographing almost inch by inch a main deck section of the battleship USS Missouri.

Because the ensemble of prints represents an entire day, they appear dark at either end and washed-out around the center, under high sun. The gradations seem to record the flare of an explosion somewhere beyond all the frames, which recalls the idea of the atomic bomb as a second sun.

During the attack on Pearl Harbor a kamikaze pilot had hit the Missouri near the area Nakahashi photographed. At World War II's end, in Tokyo Bay, the signing of Japan's surrender took place on the Missouri's main deck. Archival footage of the scene appears here in a projected video that documents the shooting of "On the Day..."

Today the Missouri sits mothballed at Pearl Harbor, but it also did duty in the Korean War and, after updating, in the Persian Gulf War. Fascinated by its connection to Japan and World War II, Nakahashi makes no mention of the ship's later adventures. But they may lend additional power to his piece in American eyes.

Even more imposing is the installation that Camerawork commissioned for this show: "The Kaiten" (2007-08), a full-scale replica of a one-man suicide submarine that Japan launched late in World War II.

Lacking access to the genuine artifact, Nakahashi photographed a scale model to make a patchwork of super close-ups of the submarine over a simple armature nearly 50 feet long, the same dimensions as the real thing.

For projects that invest so much effort in visual information, Nakahashi's pieces have the emotional blandness we likely associate with conceptual art. They speak of photography's defeat in any effort to tunnel into the past, even evocatively.

"The Kaiten" gets a little more interesting with the information that Nakahashi plans to burn it publicly after the exhibition ends. Perhaps this ritual incineration - much of Nakahashi's work has met this end - will confer a meaning on it that it lacks hanging in a gallery. Camerawork is seeking an outdoor venue where the immolation can occur legally.

Kos at Anglim: Paule Anglim presents a dramatically incomplete 40-year retrospective of work by San Francisco conceptual artist Paul Kos.

Recent things deserve the most attention, though several early pieces have real historical interest, such as a 1968-69 drawing that describes an inverted pyramid of earth - its apex touching the core - beneath some outback land that Kos owned. A written agreement and some tax receipts completed the work when Kos loaned it to the Richmond Art Center on condition that the institution cover his minuscule property tax for the duration of the show.

Conceptual art looks easy - seemingly anything goes - only until a good example come to hand.

Take Kos' "Canary/Coal(Wait for a Song)" (2007). A big lump of coal sits in the pan of a shovel whose handle takes the form of a long bamboo rod, so long that its far end serves as a branchlike perch for a stuffed canary.

Probably not meant for precise decoding, the sculpture touches energy-crisis-consciousness at several points, while relaying aesthetic echoes of "arte povera," the Italian tendency that awakened the social meanings in overlooked materials and objects.

For all its topical immediacy, "Canary/Coal..." has a homely American touch, typical of Kos' feel for objects, in the way the bamboo shaft resembles a makeshift fishing rod as it tilts and tapers.

"I Saw the Light" (2007), a two-man saw that casts epic shadows as it swings hard by a shaded light bulb, perhaps invests too much in its punning title, though the title can lead you to see it as a figure for the dangerous excitement of a Manichean view of the world.

Katherine Westerhout: Detroit: photographs. Through Feb. 16. Electric Works, 130 Eighth St. San Francisco. (415) 626-5496, www.sfelectricworks.com.

Katsushige Nakahashi: The Depth of Memory: photographic sculpture. Through March 22. San Francisco Camerawork, 657 Mission St., San Francisco. (415) 512-2020, www.sfcamerawork.org.

Paul Kos: West of the Great Divide, 1968-2008: drawings, sculpture, painting and video. Through Feb. 2. Gallery Paule Anglim, 14 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 433-2710, www.gallerypauleanglim.com.

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