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ART REVIEWS | 'NEW PHOTOGRAPHY 2009,' 'PROCESSED,' 'SURFACE TENSION'

Into the Darkroom, With Pulleys, Jam and Snakes

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Back when Andreas Gursky was on the rise, the art world buzzed about the supposedly unfair advantages of digital photography. Photoshop and other computer manipulations were seen as performance-enhancing drugs, an impression fostered by Mr. Gursky's gargantuan, hyperdetailed prints.

We have since learned that these processes need not poison the medium. Some young photographers have made a point of going digital in transparent ways. Others have disappeared into the darkroom, emerging with works that bear legitimizing traces of chemicals. Abstract photographs are everywhere, sidestepping the whole truth-in-representation issue.

Three current shows, at two major museums and a university art gallery, outline the manifold choices available to contemporary photographers. They might even provoke the kind of debates about gesture, process and intent that used to coalesce around painting.

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If "New Photography" strikes you as too far afield, head uptown to "Processed: Considering Recent Photographic Practice," at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College. Here you'll find photography without camera: just light, chemicals and paper, for the most part.

In Markus Amm's small black-and-white photograms, gradients follow the lines of creases in the paper. The technique, involving a cigarette lighter and elementary origami, is simple but inspired.

It's harder to figure out the process behind Curtis Mitchell's "Meltdowns." The imagery and the title suggest a blaze, but no fire was involved. Mr. Mitchell rigged a pulley system to move photographic paper through a vat of chemicals. More mysterious are the vaguely gestational prints titled "Mental Pictures" by Wolfgang Tillmans, who has not revealed his methods.

Organized by Amie Scally, the deputy director and curator of the downtown alternative space White Columns, the show generously includes "direct films" by Jennifer West. Ms. West makes abstract shorts by dousing film stock with substances like strawberry jam and body glitter. She also roughs it up with skateboards and sledgehammers. The films are as goofy-looking as they sound, but they remind us that cameraless photography is a messy affair.

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What is certain is that you will emerge from these three shows feeling energized about the state of photography. Artists in the post-Gursky era aren't feeling the need to scale up; instead they're branching out.