

Art in America

December 2008



The Dutch artist Berend Strik, in his second solo show at Jack Tilton, presented black-and-white photographs shot mostly in Africa. These large prints (from around 2 by 4 feet to nearly wall-size) have been, in a sense “colorized” with overlays of stitched-down fabric. The color is not representational, not the expected: deep wine-red shadows, for instance, evoke blood and give an ominous cast to otherwise ordinary outdoor scenes – a swimming pool, people talking in a market, wooden chairs upended on wooden tables.

The fabrics include velvet or velveteen and organza, with a great range of filmy or net materials that are semitransparent. Most interesting are the cut shapes that Strik tacks to the surface with modest stitches. These often augment and abstract the character of the depiction by emphasizing the curvature of a face or the shape of a cloud, for instance. Fabric on a photo of a bride layers the already gauzy effect of her veil.

Strik’s choice of images seems less a matter of exoticizing the Other than a determination to avoid the quotidian life he knows in his own country. Choosing ordinary life elsewhere, he performs an act of observation, minimizing personal interpretation. Yet when he interacts with the image in the studio, he alters the scene and makes it less mundane through emphasis or distortion that both intensifies and abstracts.

Often the netting, in close view, recalls the graininess of enlarged photographs or the benday dots of mechanical reproduction. However, the applied, palpable fabric can appear to dive into or peel away from the picture plane to create an unnatural and contoured depth. The surface shifts. Some opaque appliqués have a clear shape that contrasts with the imprecise grayness of the photo itself, and looks like a jewel on the surface. It’s ironic that the fabrics and stitches are so literal, yet their overall effect is to make the photos seem more elusive and ephemeral.

Strik also showed cloth architectural models much like theater sets – boxy affairs of one or more “rooms” with fabric, photo or embroidered surfaces on wood armatures. The odd combination of structure and image might require of the viewer even a greater change in thinking, a greater effort, than do the altered photographs. Yet the photos are more powerfully engrossing because of the image recognition and understanding that he satisfies and then complicates with his surface treatment. Strik has been stitching photographs since the late ‘80s, and these are his most fascinating yet.

- Janet Koplos