

CRITIC'S PICK

Photography in the Raw

The humbling exhibition “Photo Brut” brings together generations of self-taught artists who appropriate photographs or create their own.

By Roberta Smith
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It's great that the American Folk Art Museum doesn't charge admission these days. More than one visit may be needed to absorb its landmark exhibition “Photo Brut: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie.”

This jaw-dropping, sometimes heart-rending show — a larger version of which was seen at a photography festival in Arles, France, last summer — is a cornucopia of established and unfamiliar names, from the celebrated Henry Darger to the all-but-unknown Ichiwo Sugino; improvised mediums and often painful stories of isolated lives.

It is also the first large survey to examine what it has named Photo Brut, the various forms of photography practiced by artists referred to as self-taught or outsider in the United States, and as Art Brut, or raw art, in Europe. They didn't and don't always call what they are doing art. Much like their mainstream counterparts, they have come to use the camera and photographs for collage, assemblage, appropriation, staged photography and the like.



Installation view of “Photo Brut: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie” at the American Folk Art Museum. Forefront, Henry Darger’s panoramic view of the androgynous Vivian Girls. Credit...American Folk Art Museum; Olya Vysotskaya

The works here are drawn primarily from the extensive collection of Bruno Decharme, a French film director, whose non-photographic holdings were shown at this museum in 2001. It was organized by Decharme and Valérie Rousseau, senior curator at the Folk Art Museum, and gives further prominence to the useful phrase Photo Brut — rawness is something of a byword in the work here — and seems bound for wider usage.

The show is 13 artists smaller than in Arles, but its proportions remain epic. It contains over 400 works by more than 40 artists who were born between 1891 and 1992, about one third of whom are still alive. Several artists are well known, but I'll be concentrating on those new to me.

The curators have divided the work into four loose, overlapping groups: Private Affairs, Performing, Reformatting the World and Conjuring the Real. The section titles make increasing sense the more you engage. But you are also left to connect the dots yourself.

The show as a whole presented an installation challenge that has been mostly met, but a lot of the images are small and recessive. The trick is to look at the work, read the artist's short biography and look again, allowing the two to briefly form a little world. Here are several that I visited.

Private Affairs

A great spur to the invention or at least the constant improvement of photography revolved around sex and the ability to see people naked. No surprise that this section is shot through with intimations of both, and this exhibition is overwhelmingly male. The big names here are **Eugene von Bruenchenhein** (1910-1983), known for photographing his beautiful, strikingly innocent-looking if scantily clad wife; and **Morton Bartlett** (1909-1992), who photographed exquisite girl-dolls that he made himself. Another is the great Czech artist **Miroslav Tichy** (1926-2011), who secretly photographed women unwinding in parks or on beaches with crude cameras of his own making, creating images that grant them a modicum of privacy.



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910, Marinette, WI–1983, Milwaukee, WI); untitled; c. 1940s; 35mm transparency; 1 3/8 x 7/8 in.; © 2019 Lewis B. Greenblatt; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI. Photo courtesy of Lewis B. Greenblatt.

Steve Ashby (1904-1980) gave cutout images of faces and figures solidity by gluing them to wood and mounting them on sticks, as with a smiling, embracing couple. Elsewhere the more natural forms prevail. In an especially impressive piece, a woman has curving branches for arms, and seems to erupt out of a large burl, like a goddess.

The private affair of **Kazuo Handa** (1952-2016) combined images of women's bodies and smoking. A dedicated chain smoker who died of throat cancer, Handa made hundreds of holders for cigarettes, cigars and pipes. His watchmaker technique involved cutting images from erotic magazines into narrow strips and gluing them together. The display includes Handa's tool chest, whose delicacy suggests the ritualistic nature of his craft — something like a tea ceremony. The small cylindrical cigarette holders are themselves charming; colorfully striped, they suggest sophisticated cousins of Russian nesting dolls.

Performing

Cindy Sherman made dressing up for the camera one of the most persistent and useful staples of contemporary art. So it makes sense that the Performing section feels relatively up to date.

The staged photographs of **Marcel Bascouard** (1913-1978) show this slight, older man in women's clothes, posed in his French village. Taken by the villagers who also cared for him, they seem like decrepit documents of another time: The images are often sepia-toned and the dresses long and redolent of the 19th-century. His unchanging expression is ineffably poignant — at once adamant and forlorn, male and female. Tragic figures like Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina come to mind, but so do William Wegman's Weimaraners. It is easy to walk past these images, but I advise against it.



Morton Bartlett (1909, Chicago, Illinois, United States–1992, Boston, Massachusetts, United States); untitled (Girl Reading); c. 1955; 35mm transparency; Barry Sloane Collection, Los Angeles; © The Bartlett Project, LLC. Photo courtesy of the Bartlett Project, LLC.