

CONTACT SHEET

A universal definition for photography is as elusive today as it was the moment the medium was invented. Art, science, commerce, and government have all claimed photography in an effort to try to pin it down for their own purposes. But the medium will have none of that. Try and pin it down in the past, and it continues to move into the future. What we think about photography today will not be what we know about photography tomorrow.

Photography is a medium of change. The photographic image is something to be admired, copied, manipulated, cherished, studied, and rethought. In the late 1970s and early 1980s when artists including Cindy Sherman, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth, James Welling and others allowed us to think of photographs as more than merely evidence of things seen but representations of experience known and imagined, photography took a turn that has divided, stimulated, and confounded photographers, artists, curators and the general public ever since.

Zoë Sheehan Saldaña embraces the changeable and pliable nature of photography and for the past several years has explored these qualities of the medium at the intersection of high and low tech. This exhibition and catalogue include a range of work made over the past several years that explore how just the *idea* of a photographic image can be a gateway to new perception—and she states her case by barely clicking the shutter.

Her source materials range from photographs of missing

children and images of dangerous places and perilous occupations she finds on the Internet, to common consumer packaging including the lowly paper bag. What ties these seemingly disparate subjects together is that Sheehan Saldaña sees photographic meaning as indestructible because it has entered our lives at nearly every intersection and is no longer just a representation of the real but a currency of experience, description, and interpretation.



Fabricator weaving "America's Most Dangerous Intersection" at Taller de Gobelinos, Guadalajara, Mexico, summer 2004. Photo credit: Jaime Ashida

In the earliest work in the exhibition Sheehan Saldaña converts appropriated photographs into images that are cross-stitched onto linen with the aid of a computer and sophisticated sewing machine. Despite the use of high tech tools each image takes hours to construct through a painstaking process that involves changing thread for each different color to create a likeness of the original photographic image. In many of her cross-stitched images not every surface is

covered with thread, leaving holes in our field of vision that we quickly fill with our trusted familiarity of photography, even when we are confused by what we think we see.

Sheehan Saldaña plays with this trust and familiarity at extraordinary lengths in her tapestry *America's Most Dangerous Intersection*. The tapestry measures 72 x 100" and was created by master weavers in Mexico from a single photograph she captured off the Internet. The photograph was enlarged to such an extent that each pixel of information in the image became a one-inch square of color in the tapestry that took nearly five months to complete.

A detail of the tapestry reproduced on the cover of this catalogue shows traditional weaving techniques in use long before the invention of photography. Yet when the tapestry is viewed in its entirety from a distance, we can recognize the remains of the image's photographic evidence through the haze of history and its own abstraction.

For Sheehan Saldaña the information the tapestry communicates is a demonstration that photography is a language complete with shorthand, punctuation, and even grunts that we can readily understand and recognize despite tools or techniques employed to disguise the original image however it was produced.

Sheehan Saldaña chose the title of the exhibition, *Meanwhile*, to reference this phenomenon in a sly but subtle manner. The title refers to the use of the expression *meanwhile* in movies and cartoons as in, "Meanwhile back at the ranch" to let us know that something is always brewing away from the main action. For her purposes what is brewing away from the main action of photography is another way to consider something, or maybe everything we think we already understand.

She applies this question subtly and sardonically in the series *Shoptopping at Wal-Mart*. To begin the series she purchased a few items of clothes, in her size, from the local Wal-Mart near her rustic summer residence in rural Vermont. Back in her studio she duplicated each item by hand, matching pattern, fabric and embellishments. She then

photographed the duplicate and returned it along with the labels and price tag from the original to the rack in Wal-Mart for potential sale.

In the gallery the original purchased item is displayed on a hanger on the gallery wall and a photograph of the duplicate item is mounted next to the original. Meanwhile—as you try to wrap your brain around the concept and execution of this series—some unsuspecting petite shopper in rural

Vermont is walking around in a custom made pair of Capri pants that she purchased for \$9.87, an unintentional partner in Sheehan Saldaña's examination of the use and meaning of photography and in her observation of our consumer habits..

Reproduction, repetition, and our understanding of what is real are both the subject matter and object of suspicion in Sheehan Saldaña's work. Whether that work is done by machine, by colored pencil and ink, by

postings on the Internet, or through the lens of the camera, she shows us that photography is a language for exploding and questioning our perception—not just a medium for describing what we can see through the rigid frames of mirrors and windows.



Wal-Mart, Berlin, Vermont, fall 2003.

Jeffrey Hoone
Director
Light Work
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