

PRESS RELEASE - April 10, 2009

CHRISTOPHER SAAH *New Work*

April 16 - May 16, 2009

Opening reception:
Thursday, April 16th,
6:00-8:00 pm

Adaptation is a process frequently employed by visual artists. Sometimes this process, whereby one thing is used to make another, is meant to be noticed. Take Eve Sussman's video *89 Seconds* at Alcazar, a

contemporary work derived from a prominent seventeenth-century Velazquez painting, *Las Meninas*. Sussman re-imagines the hypothetical moments that surround the making of Velazquez's portrait by using actors and staging a nearly-silent scene that unfolds before the camera in one long 360° rotation. Many people know this particular portrait by Velazquez, but anyone unfamiliar with it could easily miss the point of Sussman's piece. Other times, the adaptation is less obvious. Walker Evans amassed a large collection of picture postcards that informed his own photographs, but they have not always been contextualized in this way.



The larger issue at stake in artistic adaptation is one that Salman Rushdie raised in a recent article. He defines the problem as “how to make a second version of a first thing, of a book or film or poem or vegetable, or of yourself, that is successfully its own, new thing and yet carries with it the essence, the spirit, the soul of the first thing.” Or, as he also puts it, how to maintain the original essence of a work when it transforms into something else. For books, screenplays, scripts, poems – forms of the written and spoken word – this dilemma looms large, and many great novels have been hackneyed by screenwriters as a result of poor translations and lagging imaginations. For the arts, and particularly for photography, the question of adaptation stretches beyond its merit. To reproduce a photograph is arguably impossible, since each



photograph represents an exact moment, a sliver of time excised from continuum. This line of thought coincides with Roland Barthes' conviction that photographs tell us “what has been.” Beyond this argument, it is physically difficult to transmute or reconstruct another work of art within the space of a photograph, a lesson I learned after being assigned to re-stage and re-photograph an image from Cindy Sherman's “Film Stills” series. Nevertheless, adaptation still matters to photographers, a fact that comes to bear in new work by Christopher Saah.

Influenced significantly by cinema, but also by music as well as his chosen medium of

photography, Saah merges these interests into his methodology and his aesthetics. He draws upon the lives and works of specific artists, such as filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni and composer Carlo Gesualdo, and titles his pieces after them. Each photograph transforms into an ode, and each artist survives in an entirely new form. Sometimes Saah's work reveals a direct visual referent, as in the case of his photograph *Untitled 02v (After Edward Steichen)*. This picture evokes several of Steichen's early experiments with color photography, particularly *The Pond - Moonrise, 1904*, with its similarly luminous, mysterious atmosphere and murky tones. In other cases, Saah's allusion is more oblique, and his work attempts to coalesce moments of inspiration, sensory responses, and historical acts into a single frame. It is here that adaptation and reinterpretation collide to create something utterly different and hauntingly familiar. The original influences, whether lyrical, visual, or written, resurface in the details that Saah has painstakingly selected and manipulated. And the ambience in each image stirs with some kind of past-life, suggesting that the presence of a bygone artist or an ancestral work of art lingers in the dark spaces of Saah's photographs. Even his image-making process, which relies upon methods used by film and sound editors as well as photographers, is a form of adaptation uniquely engineered by Saah.

In accord with Rushdie's notion of essence, Saah creates work that acknowledges the integrity of its inspiration. But his imagery is distinctly his own, and the works are united by the singularity of his vision. They sometimes hark back to images we know, but never in a way that makes them feel like lesser imitations. Perhaps it is best to describe Saah's pictures not as adaptations but, more specifically, as translations that impart a unique visual language. Something may be lost in this type of translation but something entirely new is created. In this form, adaptation can be viewed as cause for celebration.



*Amanda Maddox is assistant curator of photography and media arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. A former curatorial intern at MASS MoCA and photo conservation intern at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she has worked on a number of exhibitions. Most recently, she co-curated *Guantánamo Bay: Photographs* by Christopher Sims at Civilian Art Projects. She received an A.B. in English Literature from Brown University and an MPhil in the History of*

Photography from University of St Andrews.

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*Cover image: *Untitled 01v (for Carneades)* (detail)*