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AROUND THE GALLERIES

'Gay, A Photographic Essay 1969-1972' at drkrn.gallery

Also: 'United Fruit' at LACE and 'Fresh 'n' Easy' at Another Year in LA.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

Art Critic

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The landmark 2005 movie "Brokeback Mountain" is conventionally regarded as a romantic gay love story instead of what it really is -- a heartbreaking tragedy about the closet. Rarely does society want to admit its complicity in repression.

But 40 years ago, the Stonewall Rebellion marked a sudden beginning of the protracted end of secrecy shrouding homosexuality in American life, which the closet still represents.

The anniversary of the ruckus is being remembered in a compelling show of vintage photographs by **Anthony Friedkin** at drkrn.gallery. (A selection was last shown in 1994 at Stephen Cohen Gallery, which collaborated on this exhibition.) Collectively, the 56 prints in "Gay, A Photographic Essay 1969-1972" don't just refuse to participate in maintaining silence; they also actively embrace taking part in the diversity of gay experience that publicly emerged in Stonewall's wake.

Men, women, transsexuals, drag queens, people of different ethnicities, teenagers, seniors, street hustlers, churchmen, social workers, social activists, lovers, partygoers, parade marchers, parade watchers -- there's nothing monolithic about the subject under review in these photographs. Friedkin's visual essay emerges as a landmark in taking the hinges off the closet door.

The photographer was barely 20 when he began the series, which records aspects of gay life in Los Angeles (with side trips to San Francisco). In the gallery, the visual essay is introduced by a framed copy of an audacious 1973 letter the young artist wrote to the director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski, when the project was complete.

There's no indication of whether Szarkowski, the most powerful institutional figure in photography at the time, replied. But the letter is wonderfully pushy. Every time the word "gay" appears in Friedkin's text, it is typed in capital letters, as if to underscore that silence and invisibility are being challenged by the photographs offered for exhibition.

Some pictures have the nonchalance of street photography -- couples embracing in public, laughing among themselves, gathering on the front stoop, going about their daily business. Others radiate the documentary insights of powerful photojournalism.

In one of the most mesmerizing photographs, two Hollywood street hustlers display a forced casualness and studied masculinity as they scan the street in opposite directions. They look away from each other, but the mirror image of their poses subtly binds the men together.

The Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, stands inside the charred ruin of a burned-down sanctuary. Streaming daylight virtually obliterates much of the stained-glass window behind him, while the whiteness of the sun's illumination stands in sharp contrast to the dark fury and sorrow that mingle on the pastor's face.

Divine, the cross-dressing actor made famous in John Waters' early movies, relaxes in his dressing room at a San Francisco theater, a wide grin lighting up his face. Neither his hugely padded brassiere, the rolls of fat on his exposed torso, nor the post-Bozo-the Clown eye makeup flanked by glittery drop-earrings speaks of anything but a highly individualized, fantastically inventive and thoroughly secure self-image.

Framing the portrait with an informal intimacy, Friedkin shot Divine as the star of his own life. The artistic performances of subject and photographer are infectious, and they are replayed throughout the show in pictures of people whose names will never be known.

drkrn.gallery, 2121 San Fernando Road, Glassell Park, (323) 223-6867, through Aug. 2. Closed Mondays. www.drkrn.com

A fresh approach to produce

In the front gallery at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, a peculiar standoff is taking place between two photo-murals installed on deep blue walls. Dead ahead is a bright yellow, partly peeled banana, an explosive shape that looks like a jaunty commercial advertisement. (The spotlights help.) Turn around, and on the opposite wall is a mildly grinning Latin American laborer, a machete holstered at his side and a rifle slung across his chest.

Being caught in the middle between images of the point of sale and an armed worker is funny and odd: "Drop that banana or I'll shoot!"

The installation is the high point of "United Fruit," a project by **David Burns, Matias Viegner and Austin Young**, who go by the collective name Fallen Fruit. Loosely reminiscent of groups like the Danish artists' collective Superflex or L.A.'s Ten Lb. Ape or Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Editorial Collective, Fallen Fruit employs art as a means of social practice. They began by charting all the fruit-bearing trees on public land (or with limbs overhanging public land) in their Echo Park neighborhood, and since then they have been planting more.

The idea is that public fruit is free food -- both an image and an act of social nurture. Fallen fruit turns on its head the sinful conception of the "fall" represented by literary events in the Garden of Eden.

There's also something of Jean-François Millet's "The Gleaners" to the scheme. That classic, 19th century Realist painting (an inspiration to Van Gogh) reflects on how the poor are left to scavenge for survival among the bits and pieces left behind from the rural harvest. Here, such is life in the urban megalopolis.

Given gross economic shenanigans in American life going back at least a generation, Fallen Fruit resonates. But their artistic dilemma lies in how to translate productive social practice into an engaging exhibition that is more than thinly didactic. Partly the banana-laborer installation works because it introduces unexpected humor into an otherwise rather grim mix. (Humor succeeds only if its core is truth.) But another pairing of images -- South American farming fields on one side and workers' portraits on the other, large photographs pushed away from the walls on boxes -- is uninspired illustration.

In the back gallery, short video interviews with workers in the "banana industrial complex" add little, as do two video projections contrasting the production process on one side with young people eating bananas (sometimes rather lasciviously) on the other. Given the brutal history of U.S. corporate exploitation of Latin American farming by the United Fruit Co., to which the title "Fallen Fruit: United Fruit" refers, the attempt at personalizing the anonymous process feels rather pale.

Livelier is a companion Fallen Fruit show at the gallery Another Year in LA. "Fresh 'n' Easy" is a sort of exhibition as neighborhood co-op, where people bring scavenged grapefruits, plums and oranges to display, and a picnic table, homemade jams and cutting boards are displayed. The objects are etched with assorted self-deprecating aphorisms, few of which can be printed in a family newspaper, but all of which insist on the virtues of liberalism as a foundational American ethos.

Also shown are brightly colored digital prints, related to one of the projected videos at LACE, showing young people against vivid backgrounds ready to chow down on "fallen fruit." Produced in digital rather than analog form, the prints affirm an unmistakable gusto behind the simple, metaphorical enterprise of partaking from the publicly available tree of knowledge.

Like a Benetton ad campaign without the commerce, these fallen fruit consumers slyly refuse docile inhibition. They reconfirm for the first time in a long time that youth isn't always wasted on the young.

LACE, 6522 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, (323) 957-1777, through Sept. 27. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. www.artleak.org

Another Year in LA, 2121 San Fernando Road, Glassell Park, (323) 223-4000, through Aug. 2. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.anotheryearinla.com

christopher.knight

@latimes.com

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