

Canvas



The Photograph as Canvas

John Beech, Sebastiaan Bremer, Jim Dingilian, Rob Fischer, James Hyde, Kim Jones, Saul Leiter, Andres Lutz and Anders Guggisberg, Judith Page, and Eugenie Tung

Curated by Stephen Maine

March 11 – June 10, 2007

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



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Of the innumerable ways in which photography is continually reabsorbed and reexamined by contemporary artists, *The Photograph as Canvas* focuses on the startlingly direct procedure of applying paint or inks to the surface of the photographic print. This hybrid genre arises in part by virtue of the ubiquity of photographic imagery in contemporary culture, and the shift away from photography's mimetic function to an understanding of the photograph as an element of a proliferating, utterly subjective visual topography of modern life. For the artists in this exhibition, a photograph is not an end, but a means; it represents not a view to the world, but a construct subject to investigation.

In fact, the painted photograph is nearly as old as photography itself. The daguerreotype and other early processes shocked mid-nineteenth-century audiences with an unprecedented "likeness" of the visual world; color was often added by hand to achieve painterly effects, and reassure those audiences that they were looking at "art." As portrait photography studios flourished, it was not uncommon for a print to be altered by the addition of fanciful background and foreground elements, often rendered in gouache, transforming the sitter's situation into a new pictorial realm. But within this avowedly commercial vernacular, even such a radical manipulation of the print would not repudiate the fundamental veracity of the photographic record. Such an interrogation would fall to a later, brainy strain of fine artists looking to fuel their voracious appetite for pictorial means.

Starting in the mid-1960s, the Vienna-based Arnulf Rainer produced his flamboyant *Face Farce* and *Body Language* series, more or less burying photos of himself, Christ, and others under frenzied finger painting. A generation later, Anselm Kiefer brutalized his photos by adding melted lead, shellac, soil, and other materials. Rainer speaks to an earlier, psychoanalytically-oriented generation; Kiefer grapples with the more civic idea of the myths of the German fatherland symbolized by the photographs, tarnished yet resistant to change. Kiefer's countryman, Gerhard Richter, appears more concerned with images per se, daubing his travel photos of Florence, the Alpine town of Sils, and other locales with paint, and thus questioning, ever equivocally, which is the most concrete reality—paint, picture, or both.

In the United States, John Baldessari has for many years and with clinical precision examined a "hierarchy of seeing" in his altered photographs, unraveling the elaborately-encoded matrix of meaning in generic movie stills. More private, even furtive, is the domain of Lucas Samaras's *Photo-Transformations* of the 1970s, wherein he manually manipulated the wet emulsion of his Polaroids. While not physically adding to these anatomically-obsessed self-portraits, the painterly technique begets a solipsistic, home-alone weirdness. And Ellsworth Kelly's *Tablet*, an accumulation of casual notations and sketches, many on newspaper photos, includes the exquisitely transmogrified, painted and collaged postcards he produced intermittently in the 1970s and 1980s.

While the antecedents of this pictorial mongrel are a half-century old, there has been an escalation of this type of activity lately in artists' studios, and it has surfaced



in the galleries. Whether it is central or supplementary to their body of work, a growing number of artists indulge the impulse to refute, subvert, qualify, or otherwise fictionalize the supposed nonfiction of the photographic image. Digital technology is partly responsible for this attitudinal evolution. Image-editing software, familiar to the creative classes for over a decade, has divulged the fabricated, mutable nature of any photograph, and allowed access to the drama of its destabilization.

Artists, as cultural critics (or skeptics, at least) delight in talking back to received notions of reality, particularly those imposed by a supposed authority. Indeed, the frisson of clashing intentions may account for the lasting popularity—among appropriationists of all ages—of defacing media headshots with eyeglasses, missing teeth, drool, and sutures. With the unprecedented proliferation of photographic imagery throughout every aspect of contemporary life, its authority is ripe for questioning. So it is not surprising that a number of artists who have little in common otherwise have made this composite of techniques a significant part of their studio practice.

Revising performance photographs of himself outfitted as Mudman, **Kim Jones** in effect reimagines his identity and rewrites his history. As Mudman is encumbered by sticks, foam, wire, and mud, so these self-portraits are burdened with inks and paint—in a manner that both conceals and reveals. The element of time is ever-present, as Jones rephotographs and reworks the results, sometimes over a period of years. To very different effect, **Saul Leiter** also revisits old prints. The works in the exhibition are four versions of *A Young Musician*, based on the same source photograph. Working on his own black-and-white prints of female nudes in gouache and watercolor with a playful, improvisational touch, Leiter partially obscures the specifics of the scene and recasts the female form as a kind of psychic landscape. The play of rich washes of color against the delicate grays of the print recalls the diffused light and hazy surfaces of this photographer's pioneering street work of

Kim Jones, *Untitled*, 1994–2004

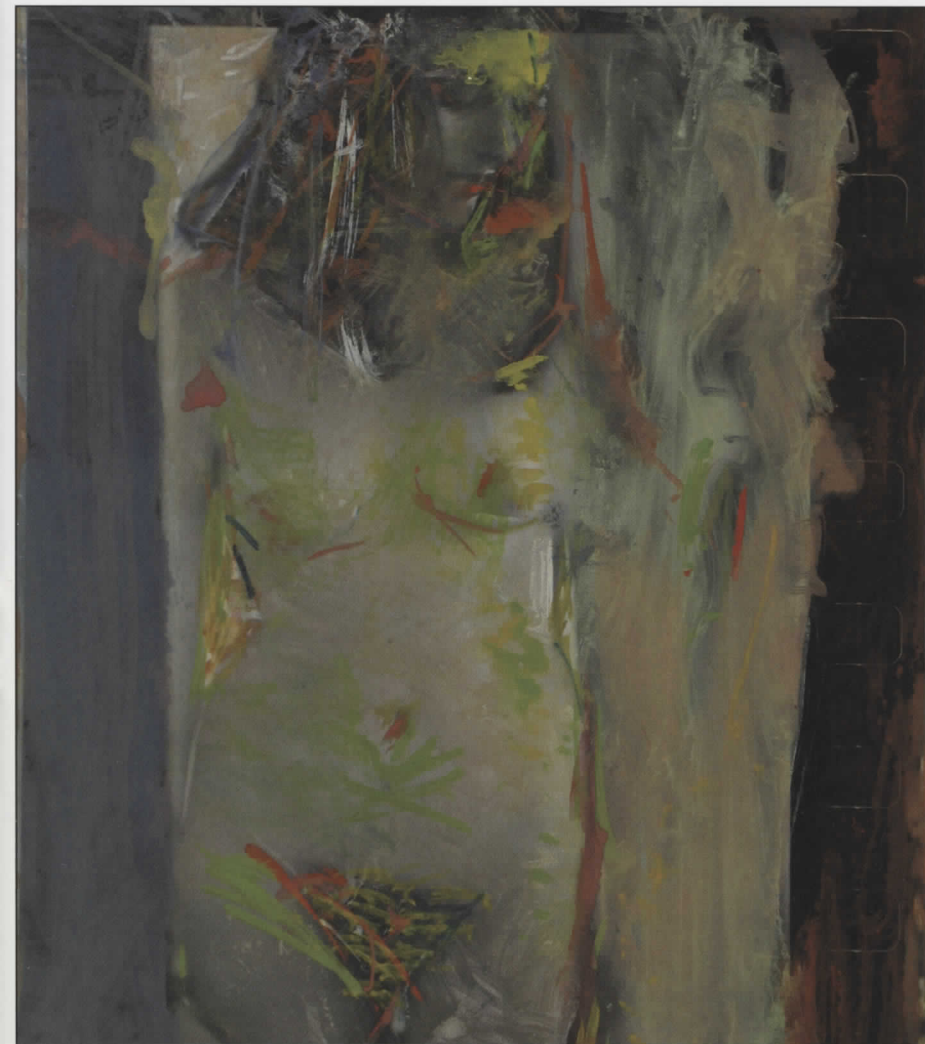




the 1950s.

A gothic sensibility guides the hand and eye of **Sebastiaan Bremer**, in whose work ghostly, slithering forces insinuate themselves into images he culls from an archive of family snapshots. Working with inks on c-print enlargements, Bremer obsessively overlays freely-invented constellations of imagery, rendered in a stipple technique of tiny dots. By the concentrated focus he fixes on the surfaces of these images from his past life, he conjures deeper levels of significance. Legibility and obfuscation of the images suggest their elusiveness and transience. *Day for Night* is typically ambitious, referring to the art-historical legacy of his native Holland in beautifully-rendered still-life motifs that encircle a darkly looming head, seen against the backdrop of a jasmine bush. **Andres Lutz** and **Anders Guggisberg** linger over a similar rift, that of mundane public imagery retooled through private reverie. The duo paint on photos published in newspapers and magazines, drawing out from these “nice and horrible subjects” a conjectural inner life. A certain storybook quality in the work implies a fragmented narrative. Though compact, *The Visitor* possesses a sprawling abundance, as if invisible forces lurking behind the quotidian are glimpsed—as if these workaday pictures enjoy a secret life.

Flaunting the perversity of painting over the ostensible subject of his photographs, **John Beech**, in his *Dumpster Drawings*, shoots dumpsters and similar construction-site equipment in situ, then paints out their contours with a single color of enamel. In a related body of work, *Coated Drawings*, the enamel is more loosely applied, and the underlying imagery not entirely obscured. In both series, the nearly



Saul Leiter, *A Young Musician, #4*, 1987

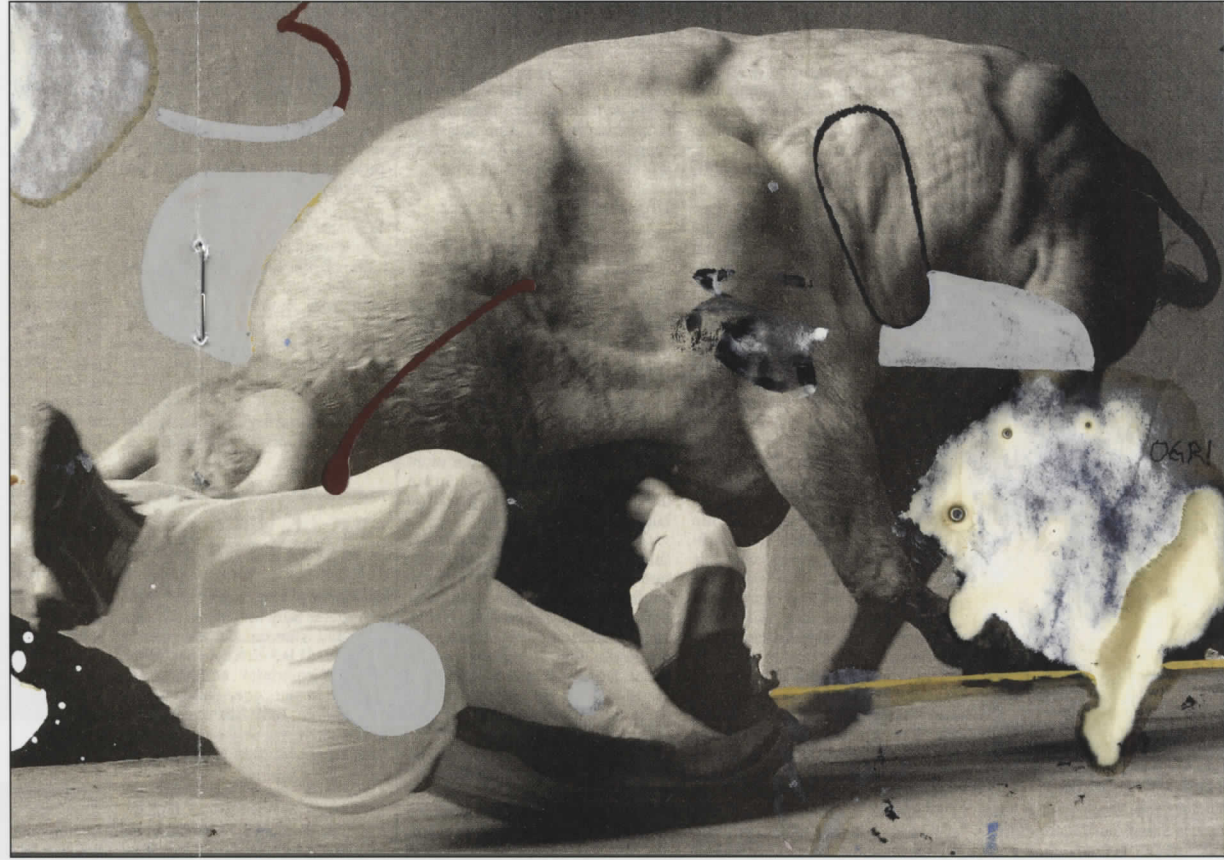
featureless dominance of the central shape, simultaneously reiterated and deleted, is in equilibrium with the incidental information at the photograph's margins. **Judith Page** takes the inverse approach. Though they begin with her snapshots of fellow artists, the works in Page's installation, *Portraits in Plasma*, are blanketed in acrylic paint, effectively disguising the subject. But fragments of essential information—often eyes and teeth—are allowed to show through and define the sitter's character. That the result is slightly disturbing pleases Page, for whom art is a way to investigate the awkward and uncomfortable in her world.

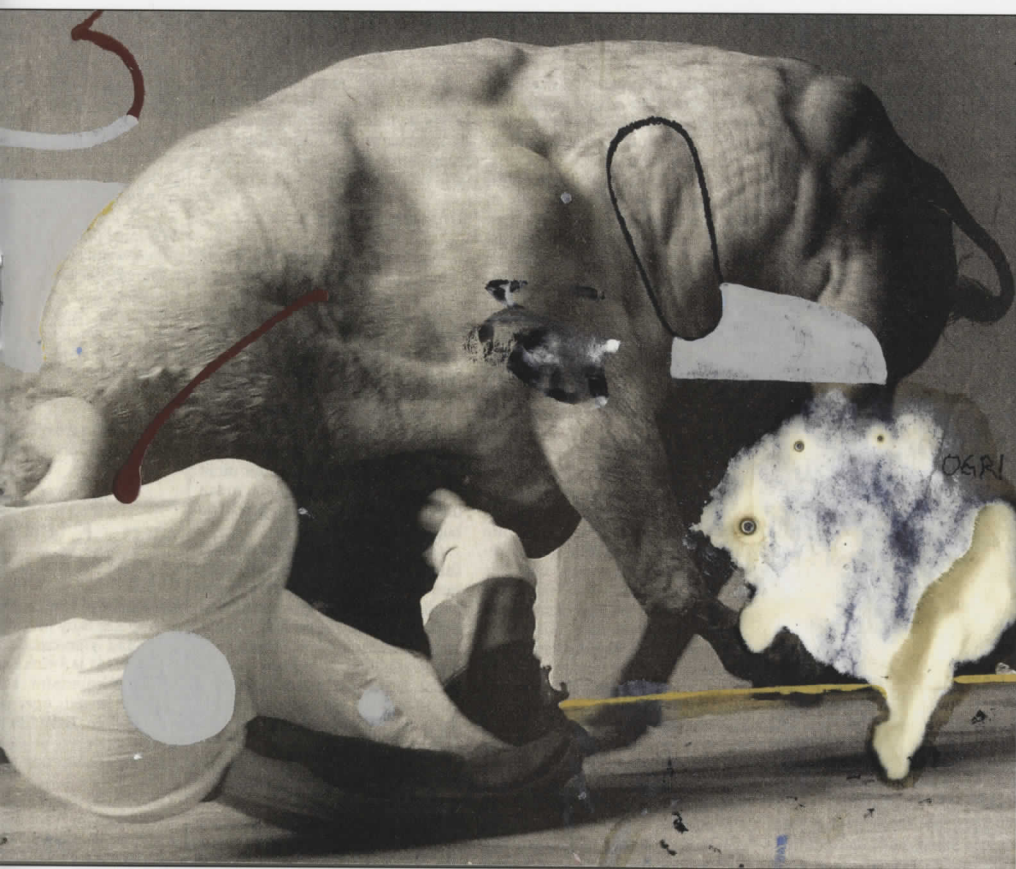
In his *Unity Road* series, **Rob Fischer** works with the desolate landscape of his beloved native Northern Minnesota. To his own photos of a mobile home parked on the edge of an overgrown field, Fischer adds ashy clouds of smoke and tongues of yellow-orange flame in acrylic paint. The addition is obvious, but has a specificity that is convincing; lacing lassitude with anxiety, Fischer's process accepts the premise of the photograph, and then completely overturns it. The pictures are surreal, hallucinatory, and emblematic of the artist's dark vision. Fischer's additive approach finds its opposite in the work of **Eugenie Tung**, who paints out the evidence of human habitation in photographs of utilitarian domestic interiors. Her deliberately imperfect technique leaves these forms—furniture, appliances, and especially people—to appear as apparitions in broad daylight. The photos depict apartments where the artist used to live, and she derives inspiration from her life as an urban nomad. **Jim Dingilian** also uses a subtractive method, meticulously bleaching portions of the emulsion of vintage photographs with a vocabulary of swirling, convoluted decorative motifs. In works like *Veil*, the interplay of the original genre scene and the negative scrim of Dingilian's embellishments is wonderfully elliptical, and the artist never upstages his unknown collaborator.

The exhibition comes full circle in the work of **James Hyde**, who paints on



John Beech, Coated Drawing #77, 2006





Andres Lutz & Anders Guggisberg, *Ogrl*, 2005

photographic enlargements of details from paintings by Western masters: Zurbaran, Goya, Theodore Rousseau, Stuart Davis. Hyde characterizes this work as paintings that use a photograph as the support. The process is one of “digging into the painting,” and in fact Hyde’s additions of paint are often not at all disjunctive, but visually seamless. This artist enjoys a pun, delighting, for example, in the presence of a human hand in the Goya, where, in his agitated brushwork, Hyde’s own “hand” is also apparent.

These artists explore the contrasting visuality of paint and print. Paint assumes a physical, material presence when forced upon and into the smooth-surfaced, optical space of the photograph. (It is noteworthy that seven of the ten artists in the exhibition—Beech, Dingilian, Fischer, Hyde, Jones, Lutz/Guggisberg, and Page—are also involved in sculptural pursuits.) The history of photomontage, a related form, is by now quite familiar, as that genre’s similarity to the discontinuous surfaces and fragmented space of cubism held immediate appeal for vanguard artists of the early twentieth century. The story of the painted photograph has yet to be written, and this exhibition hopes to lay the groundwork.

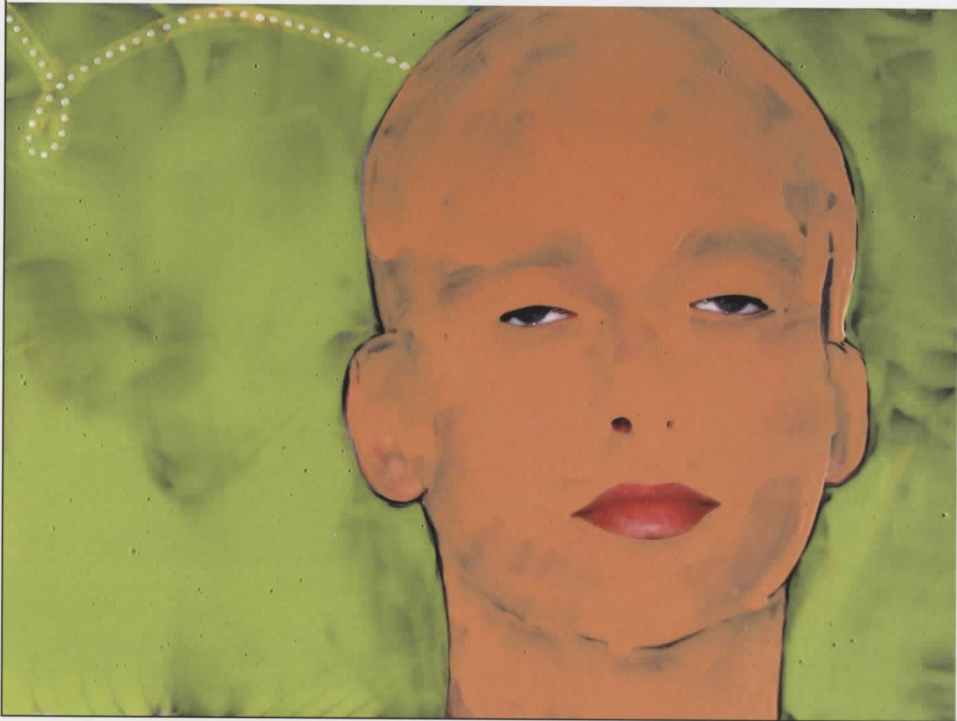
I wish to thank the staff of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum for their faith in *The Photograph as Canvas; Art on Paper*, in the pages of which the original incarnation of the project appeared; the lenders to the exhibition, for their patience and support; and, especially, the artists, with whom it has been a great pleasure to work.

Stephen Maine

Stephen Maine is an artist and critic based in Brooklyn, New York. Born in Hartford in 1958, he received his formal training at Rhode Island School of Design, Hartford Art School, the University of Connecticut, Yale University, and Indiana University (BFA Painting, 1982). He is a regular contributor to *Art in America*, *Artnet.com Magazine*, and *Art on Paper*, and is represented by Metaphor Contemporary Art in Brooklyn, where his work was seen last summer in a group exhibition titled *Design/Build*. Maine is a member of American Abstract Artists, and the International Association of Art Critics. He teaches a writing workshop for MFA candidates in Fine Arts at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

Rob Fischer, *Unity Road No. 1*, 2004-05





Judith Page, *Robin* (8-27-06), 2006

Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches unless otherwise noted

John Beech

Coated Drawing #77, 2006

Enamel on black-and-white RC photograph mounted on aluminum
21 7/8 x 13 7/8

Coated Drawing #78, 2006

Enamel on black-and-white RC photograph mounted on aluminum
21 7/8 x 13 7/8

Coated Drawing #79, 2006

Enamel on black-and-white RC photograph mounted on aluminum
74 x 48

Dumpster Drawing #163, 2006

Enamel on black-and-white RC photograph mounted on aluminum
21 7/8 x 13 7/8

Courtesy Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Sebastiaan Bremer

Day for Night, 2006

Ink on c-print
91 x 118

Collection of F. Elliot Leonard and Roger Litz

Dead Cock and Contemplative Magpie, 2006

Ink on c-print
102 x 118

Courtesy Roebling Hall, New York

Jim Dingilian

Provisional Garden Structure, 2006

Selectively-bleached found photograph
9 3/8 x 7

Convergence, 2005

Selectively-bleached found photograph
10 x 8

Collection of Robert D. Speiser

Social Dilemma, 2005

Selectively-bleached found photograph
8 x 10

Veil, 2005

Selectively-bleached found photograph
10 x 8

Veranda, 2005

Selectively-bleached found photograph
6 x 8

Collection of Robert D. Speiser

Courtesy McKenzie Fine Art, New York

Rob Fischer

Unity Road No. 1, 2004–05
Acrylic on c-print mounted on plexiglass
42 x 42
Collection of Dirk Skreber, New York

Unity Road No. 2, 2004–05
Acrylic on c-print mounted on plexiglass
42 x 42
Collection of Joseph Kraeutler

Unity Road No. 5, 2004–05
Acrylic on c-print mounted on plexiglass
42 x 42
Hall Collection

Courtesy Cohan and Leslie, New York

James Hyde

The Architect (Goya), 2006
Acrylic on photograph
20 1/2 x 27

Green Leap (Rousseau), 2006
Acrylic on photograph
20 1/2 x 27

Lion Song (Zurbaran), 2006
Acrylic on photograph
20 x 27

We Move it Around (Davis), 2005
Acrylic on photograph
20 1/2 x 27

Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Kim Jones

Self Love, 1986
Ink and acrylic on black-and-white photograph
16 x 20
Collection of Robert Storr

Untitled (David), 1991–2002
Acrylic and ink on photograph
24 x 16

Untitled, 1994–2004
Acrylic and ink on photograph
28 1/2 x 39
Collection of Clifford Diver

Untitled, 1986–2002
Ink and acrylic on photograph
11 x 14

Untitled, 1986–2005
Ink and acrylic on photograph
11 x 14

Courtesy of the artist and Pierogi, Brooklyn

Jim Dingilian, *Veil*, 2005





James Hyde, *We Move It Around (Davis)*, 2005

Saul Leiter

A Young Musician, #1, 1987

Gouache and watercolor on silver gelatin print
10 x 8

A Young Musician, #2, 1987

Gouache and watercolor on silver gelatin print
10 x 8

A Young Musician, #3, 1987

Gouache and watercolor on silver gelatin print
10 x 8

A Young Musician, #4, 1987

Gouache and watercolor on silver gelatin print
10 x 8

Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York

Andres Lutz and Anders Guggisberg

Goat, 2005

Mixed media on paper
5 x 9

Ogr!, 2005

Mixed media on paper
6 x 8

Midnight Sun, 2005

Mixed media on paper
9 x 14

Landslide, 2005

Mixed media on paper
5 x 4

The Visitor, 2005

Mixed media on paper
6 1/2 x 8

Courtesy of the artists and Anna Helwing Gallery,
Los Angeles

Judith Page

Portraits in Plasma

Barbara, Tom, Carly, Lucy, Maria, David, Ted, Amanda,
Annie, Sarah, Matt, Jane, Robin, 2003–06

Tar gel, acrylic, c-prints, archival digital photographs on
canvas

Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Eugenie Tung

1775 S.E. Columbia Drive, Office and Kitchen Area, 2006

Acrylic on c-print
20 x 30

15 Lawton Street #30, Brooklyn, Home Office Area, 2005

Acrylic on c-print
20 x 30

829b High Street, Bellingham, Fire Escape Area, 2004

Gouache on color photograph
6 x 4

1775 S.E. Columbia Drive, Richland, Living Room and
Balcony Area, 2004

Gouache on digital print
13 x 19

Courtesy of the artist

look. look again.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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It is the mission of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum to be a national leader in the exhibition of significant and challenging contemporary art with an emphasis on emerging and mid-career artists, a world-class innovator of museum education programs, and a vital cultural resource for our community.

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Sebastiania Bremer, *Dead Cock and Contemplative Maggie* (detail), 2006



Sebastiaan Bremer, *Dead Cock and Contemplative Magpie* (detail), 2006

