



Whitney Biennial 2014

Stephen Berens



Top: August 4, 2005, Night; July 28, 2005, Night (Lightning), 2013. Dye-based inkjet print, 24 x 34 in. (61 x 86.4 cm); bottom: August 4, 2005, Night; July 28, 2005, Night (Lightning); July 28, 2005, Night; August 7, 2005, Night; July 29, 2005, Night; Middle of the Night, 2013. Dye-based inkjet print, 24 x 34 in. (61 x 86.4 cm)

Born 1952 in
Fort Collins, CO

Lives in
Los Angeles, CA

Stephen Berens

GB: Either way, it's only temporarily effective. Hans Haacke uses part of the dominant high culture to criticize the function of the whole system through his object displays. The question is, how broadly effective do you want to be? That is a difficult question with artists. Artists can be confused about their situation as a powerless elite. We operate from the protective base of the art world, a situation in which we can develop ideas but a place from which it is complicated to launch media-related artwork without it getting co-opted by the very structures it criticizes. Although I use those structures, I'm resisting one-channel television because I haven't figured out how to effectively communicate except in a theatrical setting.

CS: You've been criticized for being high-tech, which is another way of infiltrating popular culture—using the technology that it uses.

GB: It's something visual artists tend to resist, although that resistance is steadily breaking down. It's strange that the art world resists using the visual tools of our time. What's that about? It is scary when you have this heritage that you invoke—art history.

CS: It's supposed to be more pure if you use materials like paint or make it all yourself or use another person to make it for you.

GB: The art world is trying to protect this antiquated territory, and what is most disturbing about switching over to the newer technologies is that there is no authority to invoke. There aren't any guidelines to tell you that you're making "good" art. There's so much experimentation to do, so many blind visual forays to risk, so many conceptual implications of the newer technologies to try to comprehend. Many artists aren't willing to take those risks. You don't know if you are going to be effective or not, if you are going to make silly or profound works. I think that's what terrifies most artists, and I think that's why the

art world is so slow to accept the culture of today.

CS: You have used imagery from other people's artwork in some of your own pieces. I interpreted that as reducing expensive works of art by male artists—paintings—to this disposable-imagery level.

GB: I wanted to use the art as signs and not as valuable objects. I decided to combine those found-art reproductions as one combines words in a language or even just parts of an alphabet. I saw them as a moving language. At the same time, I realized that because we had gotten so much of our art out of magazines and reproductions, we weren't contemplating art anymore. I go into galleries to see shows, to be aware of what is going on, and it takes three minutes to see a show. Where are we? And what are we doing? It's our nervous system—the time we live in—it's not about reverie. There are some haunting artists that somehow transcend that, where you can't get away from it. But there's no place that's conducive to viewing that work. You either describe or analyze an environment. It's a way artists examine what they're doing and why they're doing things—how they're operating. I think a balance between the two would be the most potent.

CS: It's like classical and romantic, those two sides.

GB: Artists using media have taken on a more complicated position in

the culture than painters. Painters like tradition. And I think it's a hundred or a thousand times more difficult for a painter to make politically engaged work. They know that if it smells like art and looks like art and tastes like art—it's painting. There's not much risk in the art world. At the same time, I'm still operating within the art world. There is that base. Maybe it's a base to reaffirm your goals or your sanity in trying to develop ideas.

CS: You also work in film—in a more traditional way, with a script and a crew. What got you going in that direction?

GB: It's the other major media besides television. The mechanics of making film shows me how my perceptions can be altered. At one time you asked me if I had a preference for one genre over another. I don't. I want to experiment. In the last few years, I've realized the visual-art world has to broaden the areas in which it is dealing. As visual artists we don't become "video artists," we don't become "filmmakers." We are still visual artists, but we need to critically interface those mediums in our work. Until there are more artists doing that, oppositional media art could become obsolete. We need to stay alert to the political implications of the conceptual evolutions of our newer technologies.

This is an excerpt from an interview that was originally published in *BOMB*, no. 18 (Winter 1987).

STEPHEN BERENS speaks with LESLIE DICK

Leslie Dick: Looking at these photographs, in your series *All days are nights*, I found myself thinking about time and place, and also about what it might mean to layer different moments on top of each other and how that relates to painting. I'm interested in the photograph as something that both marks an irrevocably past moment and preserves that same moment. Loss and preservation are registered in the same image. It seems that your decision to layer these moments, these instances of looking, really draws us into the emotional dimension of that question of time.

Stephen Berens: First off, it's important to me that the process is a generative system, where you lay one image on top of another—the first print contains a single image; the second print, two images; the tenth print, ten images—until the print appears entirely black. But I'm not interested in the work solely because it was made using this generative system. I think, at a certain point in time, making art by following a set of rules was enough. But I purposefully make interventions into the system.

LD: I was remembering Michael Asher's show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2008, where he rebuilt all the temporary walls from the various exhibitions of the previous ten years, using only the studs. That work engaged architecture, exhibition, repetition, redundancy, and many other things. It was extremely rigorous and completely systematic. Still, there were all these incredible by-products. It started to look like a hall of mirrors. It generated all sorts of optical effects and illusions, and it was very, very beautiful.

SB: Yes, I remember that to navigate through the space you had to literally step through the walls, which made me hyperaware of my presence as a viewer and a participant.

LD: It's paradoxical: as if the tighter you squeeze—screwing the system down—the more this ooze of emotional by-product comes out the side. With *All days are nights*, you never set out to produce such emotional effects, to call up memories of Romantic painting, for example. It happened as a result of a system. Like going the long way around the barn.

SB: I believe that when Asher and Sol LeWitt designed their systems, it didn't concern them whether or not something turned out to be beautiful. In the catalogue for LeWitt's retrospective at MASS MoCA, John Baldessari tells a story about meeting LeWitt in the late sixties. Baldessari told him that he thought one of his wall draw-

ings was beautiful, and LeWitt's response was basically that this was beside the point. And I would say I don't think it is.

LD: Right on!

SB: I think that the reason their work is still engaging is because it is both incredibly rigorous and beautiful. While they always made their decisions beforehand, I have been developing a way of working where my specific history and interests leak in, without abandoning the system. The choices I made in *All days are nights* are mostly about maintaining distinctions: the first image has very even lighting, then this one adds shadows, this one adds a bird, this one adds another bird. This one adds a cloud. This one starts to add more clouds. Out of this process, a series of unplanned connotations begins to appear. And that's much more interesting to me than setting out to make a photograph that looks like a nineteenth-century painting, for example.

LD: By layering these photographs, you've constructed a set of images with multiple associations. They invoke those architectural views in the backgrounds of early Renaissance paintings, as well as neoclassical views of Rome, heavy-duty Romantic painting, and even that early moment in art photography when Edward Steichen wanted photographs to look like paintings. This work has got all these things buried inside it.

SB: It's interesting to me that making art using a generative system, which is a twentieth-century idea, along with the most recent printing technology produces something that looks like it was made 150 or even 200 years ago.

LD: It stretches from early Renaissance to the daguerreotype, and through to Ad Reinhardt's late work! It's mind-boggling that it can extend so far with only eighteen images, layered one on the other and then removed in reverse order, one by one.

SB: That's why the generative system is so important.

LD: Absolutely. It's productive: you discover things you never imagined were there, as if the system itself holds all this visual potential or memory. A time machine. What about the ways we tend to use the image now, on our various screens?

SB: I didn't set out to do this, but I think the work is a reaction to the proliferation of images and to how quickly everybody looks at them—especially photographs. On Facebook, people may look at a photograph for a tenth of a second, right? They're grabbing little bits of information. With this work, I am making something that's the opposite of that, something you have to be in the presence of and to spend time looking at. Trying to get back to Reinhardt, perhaps. It really impressed me that he was willing to make works that were just not reproducible. To see the way he subtly shifted value and luminosity, you had to be right there, standing in front of the paintings. I'm wondering, given the present proliferation of images, seamlessly transmitted from device to device, does it still make sense to ask viewers to slow down? Not to absorb an image instantly but to decipher it?

LD: So encountering the work can be an embodied experience, located in the particular time and place of viewing. For me, these photographs are more about the time and place of those lost moments, which somehow aren't lost—but then they do get lost once the image turns black.

SB: Well, almost. Different shades of black.

LD: Maybe it's about having and not having at the same time. It's all still there: the birds, the clouds—even the helicopters! All eighteen images are there, but we can only see the tiniest traces of them.

SB: Yeah, but I think as our lives go on and our moments accumulate, the same thing happens, right?

Dawoud Bey

LD: Yes.

SB: It becomes so dense that you can't separate it out anymore.

LD: Time and place.

SB: I can separate out the time when I left Nebraska. I can separate out when I left Florida and when I moved from East Los Angeles to Eagle Rock (northeast LA). But it's hard to separate out all the cumulative moments in each of those places. So I think the work is also somehow about that.

also the norm while he was growing up. I think Birmingham became for many black people, through the notorious viciousness of the commissioner of public safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, the most horrifically iconic of Southern cities because of the ubiquity of those photographs.

DAWOUD BEY speaks with IMANI PERRY

Dawoud Bey: I first became aware of your connection to Birmingham, Alabama, when I posted some of my snapshots taken during one of my visits there on Facebook. You were the first one to comment, and you said, "That's about four miles or so from my family home. I'm so excited you're doing a Birmingham project." I was both surprised and heartened by your response. At that point, I was still finding my way in Birmingham, becoming familiar with the place. Initially my visits were about trying to displace the city's mythic history, which I had been carrying in my head for so many years, with an actual physical experience in the here and now. What were your thoughts when you first saw those pictures? What memories did they bring back for you? What did they provoke?

Imani Perry: Your pictures remind me of something I so cherish about my birthplace. There is a quiet dignity to people and places in Birmingham. There is Armstrong's barbershop. Mr. Armstrong was a local leader who fought to desegregate city schools, worked on the Birmingham campaign, and provided a space for political discussions and organizing in his barbershop, which also was where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had his hair cut when in the city. But, look, it is a characteristically simple and tasteful storefront. That is Birmingham: where history lives but does not boast, and where the resilience and grace displayed in the civil rights movement are always in the air. So is the restraint and forbearance that were necessary for survival under Jim Crow. It is quite powerful to me, how images like these of businesses can evoke that energy. You clearly "saw" Birmingham quite deeply.

Recently I have been reading Gordon Parks's memoirs, and several of them begin with discussions of Birmingham, which fascinates me because he was from Kansas. I am curious as to why you think

Birmingham remains such a powerful symbol in black life. How do you think visual images describe both the symbolic meaning and the spirit of the place?

DB: So much of what I know about Birmingham is from photographs. I think that the Children's March in Birmingham in May 1963 and then the bombing of the church four months later deeply jolted the psyches of black Americans. The horror of those two events reverberated far beyond the city itself. Those outside of Birmingham experienced these events through photographs. The images of young black people peacefully demonstrating for their rights being attacked by police dogs and blasted by high-pressure fire hoses were evidence of just how high the stakes were and how white supremacy was so absolutely maintaining white privilege and black disenfranchisement in the South. The level of violence against black folks in Birmingham became well known because of these photographs, so much so that it reverberated for me as an eleven-year-old black boy in New York, as well as for Gordon Parks, who was from Kansas, where segregation was

There didn't seem to be any photographs of Birmingham that I encountered when I was young that were not documenting this ongoing struggle against segregation. Today, an equally compelling visualization of Birmingham has not yet gained enough prominence to stand alongside those narratives of the past. It's one of the reasons, I think, that the past hangs so heavily in the air there. Are there any pictures that come to mind for you, since those civil rights-era images, that reflect the Birmingham you know more intimately?

IP: Interestingly, because I didn't grow up in Birmingham (I was born there and then spent holidays and summers there throughout my childhood and young adulthood), the homesickness I have for the city has a cinematic quality. Much of my relationship to "home" has been dependent on memory and on calling up images and sounds. So when I have encountered the work of photographers who visualize my home, I get very excited. Two images are very powerful for me. The first is Gordon Parks's *Department Store* (1956), which for years I thought was taken in Birmingham but which I learned recently was actually taken in Mobile. It features an African American woman and child standing under an orange-red neon Colored Entrance sign. The harsh light of Jim Crow does not diminish the duo. They are both richly brown; the woman's walnut complexion is deeper than the girl's, whose skin is just a taste more burnished than copper. Their faces are enchanting in their pastel surroundings. Both are dressed sharply, the woman in chiffon, the girl in a Sunday dress. The woman's pose is restrained yet steely, with some added delicacy as