

On Bavarian by Law and German Indians

by Gary Hesse

Our interpretation of photography is heavily weighted towards what an image appears to be, what it is able to communicate, and how it affects us. On the surface the photographs of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher present us with deceptively straight-forward depictions of seemingly familiar places and events. However, in each case our assumptions are thrown askew when the context underlying each image is revealed to be something quite different. Robbins/Becher are a married couple who work collaboratively using photography as a means to document what they refer to as the transportation of place. In elaborating this idea the artists wrote, "Notions of place have become intensely confused due to overlapping eras of slavery, colonialism, holocausts, immigration, tourism, and mass-communications. We focus on particular examples of such confusions, always a place, event, or artifact on display for the public."

The artists have worked on series ranging from cultural non sequiturs such as architectural photographs of American businesses and financial institutions which resemble New York City's Wall Street district that are found in Havana Cuba, the New York City skyline recreated in Las Vegas, Nevada, Dutch villages in Michigan, and German villages in Washington state. Their work has also included highly charged expositions of colonialism and genocide, as in their series about the concentration camp Dachau, and in their series colonial remains, which documents the remnants of German colonialism in Africa. In each series the selection and editing of images is well considered to regulate the degree of information which is revealed or concealed. With each series the

artists provide a brief statement describing the circumstances behind the subject. Individual photographs in each series contain only short descriptive titles, or remain untitled. The ambiguity and neutrality of the artists' photographs, paired with their statements which disclose the subjects' background and history, set up a visual contradiction that forces us to reevaluate our assumptions and generalizations about what we believe we are looking at.

In the series *Holland* (1993) and *Bavarian by Law* (1996)-the latter featured in this exhibition-the artists photographed the towns of Holland, Michigan and Leavenworth, Washington, two communities that set out to fashion a European identity for themselves in order to attract tourists. In both series the artists offer similar photographs of homes and businesses that have been transformed by their owners in order to give the appearance of what one would encounter in a Dutch or Bavarian village. These transformed villages also serve as a backdrop for other photographs of cultural festivals where towns- people dress in traditional costumes and perform for the benefit of visiting tourists-exploiting cultural stereotypes such as wooden shoes, tulips, and windmills in Holland, and men in lederhosen with alpenhorns in Leavenworth. The text accompanying *Holland* tells of the town's intention to promote the heritage of its original Dutch settlers; however, in the case of Leavenworth, there was no pre-existing cultural connection to Germany; its theme was selected simply because of the surrounding landscape's resemblance to the Bavarian Alps.

The 1991 series *colonial remains* might initially appear similar to *Holland* and *Bavarian by Law*-where photographs of European-style buildings and streets are located in an

incongruous setting. The statement that accompanies the series reveals the location where the photographs were taken and the history of the unwanted presence of colonists in the country of Namibia, which was one of four German colonies in Africa in the late 19th and early 20th century. Despite open resistance from the local populations, German colonists exploited the resources of the land, and forced their own institutions on the local populations. Another series that marks the depth of one culture's subjugation and genocide over another is the artists' 1994 series Dachau. In this series, photographs that show German children on a class field trip visiting the concentration camp with its freshly painted walls and flower gardens and hedges covering the original execution range and blood ditch offer one of the most shocking commentaries on the Holocaust simply because of their banal neutrality. Regarding this series, and perhaps in reference to colonial remains, the artists wrote, "We were primarily interested in how inadequately such a place transports the past into the present."

This confusion and intermingling of place, culture, and history is the common thread throughout the work of Robbins/Becher. This exhibition presents two recent series, *Bavarian by Law* and *German Indians*, which offer two examples of cultural appropriation that exist for two very different reasons. The series *German Indians* characterizes a long-standing German fascination with the American West, and in particular Native American culture, as seen in the artists' photographs of Indian fan clubs at an annual gathering in Radebeul Germany. In their statement the artists cite a number of explanations for this phenomenon which has existed in Germany for almost one hundred years. One of the primary influences for this interest in Native American culture was the 19th century German writer Karl May, who wrote several books about the American

West, casting Native Americans as heroes and whites as corrupt invaders. The artists suggest that some of the reasons behind the growth of Indian fan clubs in Germany after WWII are "a romantic view of a pre-industrial past, " and the feeling of being dissuaded from displays of nationalism, Germans are more willing to adopt an alternate cultural identity.

The series German Indians pairs photographs of various encampments and ceremonial reenactments at an East German powwow with a series of formal portraits of the festival participants, which are a deliberate allusion to the early 20th century portraits of Native Americans made by Edward Curtis. More interested in creating romanticized impressions of Indian chiefs and warriors than in the documentation of specific Native American peoples, Curtis took broad liberties in embellishing his subjects by combining elements of dress of various nations together to create stylized representations, or, more appropriately, misrepresentations, of Native American people. Many of the German Indians hold the belief that they are preserving Native American culture. Ironically, like Curtis, they too are combining elements of various nations in the creation of their own weekend personas.

Pairing Germans dressed as Native Americans with Americans dressed as Germans in this exhibition has a certain symmetry to it that is in keeping with past subjects of Robbins/Becher which confound the demarcation of place and cultural identity. In the case of the Radebeul Indians, the participants believe that they are honoring and helping to preserve a culture with which they feel a connection. As for the Leavenworth Germans, this may just be attributed to a clear case of commerce over culture.

Historically, the notion of culture and place was associated with geography. Today the intersection and mixing of cultures through tourism, immigration, colonialism, and wars has blurred the clearly defined boundaries of cultural identity and history. Andrea Robbins and Max Becher delineate this cultural confusion in their photographs, which conceal, rather than reveal, a conclusive interpretation, leaving the viewer with many questions regarding the preservation of one culture weighed against the assimilation and subordination of another.

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Light Work

1999