

Works Of Abstract Photography Have An Eye On The Past

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Contemporary visual artists often use photography in primitive ways, so it is no surprise that three of the six artists in an engrossing group show of abstract photography-at the CompassRose Gallery, 325 W. Huron St.-have returned to a primitive means of picture making, the photogram.

This method of creating images without a camera proceeds by placing objects on a sheet of sensitized paper that one then exposes to light. William Henry Fox Talbot devised the process before 1835, and nearly a century later both Man Ray and Christian Schad elaborated it.

Of the artists on show, Joan Fontcuberta evokes Talbot's pictures most clearly, with imprints of leaves on leaf-patterned wallpaper. Neither Adam Fuss nor Bill Jones is as direct, though the images created by Jones' antique lamp shades recall Talbot's organic subjects and Fuss' toned "splash"

pictures are in the modernist line established by Man Ray and Schad.

Light is at once the agent and subject of large-scale works by James Nares and Herwig Kempinger, which relate to Abstract Expressionist drawings and paintings, specifically those of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. This involves a nice irony insofar as a century ago photographic references to painting were just beginning to be ridiculed as wrongheaded and academic, the very opposite of how one perceives them now.

The right half of Barbara Ess' pinhole-camera diptych also recalls a famous lithograph by Edvard Munch, but here the link is not as obvious as, say, the one Jerry Uelsmann forged long ago between his surrealistic photographs and Rene Magritte's paintings. (Through Aug. 24.)

PORTRAITS/CHICAGO (East West, 311 W. Superior St.): A novel idea of bringing together art by 11 portrait painters and sculptors who work on commission is tarnished by the quality of the results, which mainly are suitable for boudoir or board room.

Treatments vary from decorative to illustrational, romantically tinged or modernistically teased, with strong debts to photography. In nearly all cases the aim is less to engage the great tradition of portraiture than to present cosmeticized likenesses that will flatter.

The exceptions, which may be regarded as art as well as public relations, are some of the drawings by **Grace Cole** and an oil self-portrait by Jeffrey Hanson Varilla. Almost everything else, despite technical competence, is fluff. (Through Aug. 30.)