

Current Shows

Jean Baudrillard

CHÂTEAU SHATTO, LOS ANGELES, USA



Jean Baudrillard, *Quai de Seine*, 1998 Giclée print on pure cotton paper 60 × 90 cm

12 December, 2015 – 6 February, 2016

They say if you can remember the nineties, you weren't there. Good thing they're back. Amid the resurgent fads of septum piercings, digital primitivism and Matthew Barney, a show has opened at Château Shatto in Los Angeles of Jean Baudrillard's photographs that dances, it would seem, to the same 128 BPM of rave nostalgia.

While his star had risen over America in the previous decade, nearly all the works in the exhibition date from the nineties and so, in a sense, serve as documents of that footloose and increasingly weird period in Baudrillard's career. *The Matrix* (1999) lay ahead at decade's end, while already behind him were his sweeping sociological studies of the function of the commodity, his polemical reassessments of Marxism and his visionary accounts of a present ruled by simulation and



Jean Baudrillard, *Las Vegas*, 1996, Giclée print on pure cotton paper, 60 × 90 cm

hyperreality. His writing was becoming increasingly cryptic, insular and fragmented: a stylized patchwork of travel diary, aphorisms and topical musings often circling back to the same story or idea. The Death of Theory by digression and repetition. During this period Baudrillard, having resigned his professorship at Nanterre, travelled the world playing the role of theorist-provocateur. It was then, too, that he began exhibiting his photographs, first at a gallery in Paris and then at the 1993 Venice Biennale.



Jean Baudrillard, *Luxembourg*, 2003, Giclée print on pure cotton paper, 60 × 90 cm

The 20 prints on display at Château Shatto have a gritty and improvisational quality. Shot on 35mm film, they are studies of incidental forms, often encountered on his travels and often on the streets. Titles only indicate place: Rio, Bruges, Amsterdam, Toronto, Las Vegas. Call them a companion to the fragmentary travel writing in *America* (1986) and the four volumes of *Cool Memories* (1990). Baudrillard himself describes travel as a kind of deliverance from spectacular banality, saying that it 'was once a means of being elsewhere, or of being nowhere. Today it is the only way we have of feeling that we are somewhere.' He goes on: 'What could be more closely bound up with travel, with the anamorphosis of travel, than photography? ... Hence photography's affinity with everything that is savage and primitive, and with that most essential of exoticisms, the exoticism of the Object, of the Other.'



Jean Baudrillard, *Corbières*, 1999, Giclée print on pure cotton paper, 90 × 60 cm

Baudrillard had long been interested in what he saw as the growing supremacy of objects over subjects – and photography, for him, seemed to lay this bare. The only human form to be seen in this show is in a self-portrait in a dark room taken in Corbières, his face masked by the camera, his body half in the shadows. But there are a lot of *things*, often in entropic states: crumbling statuary, graffitied walls, an abandoned train and a car rusting underwater. Other works turn on a play of illusion. In *Toronto* (1994), a building sits in front of a vast, dull sky, thick with grey clouds, while reflected across the structure's glass facade is a wispy, white cloud that seems almost illuminated, as if beamed in from somewhere else. It's hard not to read it as parable: the surface appearance is more real than what it reflects.



Jean Baudrillard, *Toronto*, 1994, Giclée print on pure cotton paper, 60 × 90 cm

Baudrillard denied any connection between his thought and his pictures. Critic Sylvère Lotringer, on the other hand, claims that we glimpse – if not in the photos themselves, then in Baudrillard's exhibiting of them, in his participation in the art world – proof of the critique of contemporary art offered in his 1996 column in *Liberation*, 'The Conspiracy of Art'. There, Baudrillard reiterated his belief that art as a distinct field had disintegrated into a ubiquitous 'transaesthetics' of everyday life. If everything is art, art is emptied of its distinction and meaning. The conspiracy is that we pretend it otherwise. By showing these pictures, Lotringer argues, Baudrillard, who 'had no artistic claim or pedigree', demonstrated that 'there was nothing special anymore about art.' Maybe. But if we take Baudrillard's word for it, then both the pictures and the exhibition are incidental. What counts is the process – a kind of 'travelling' or 'acting-out', and in this respect, a way of escaping oneself.' Perhaps the 'Ultimate Paradox' to

which this show's title refers is not so much Baudrillard's quaint style of street photography, but that a thinker often mistaken as the prophet of virtuality and simulacra should, in the end, be searching for some old-fashioned transcendence.

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