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Saturday, April 21st, 2012

Specifics of Place and Realities Everywhere: Mary Ellen Carroll at Third Streaming

by Patricia Milder

Mary Ellen Carroll: *Federal, State, County and City (The Deferment of Impatience and Motor Responses to Being in California with Laura 'Riding' Jackson, Florence Knoll, Kruder and Dorfmeister, Jose Feliciano and Gertrude Stein)* at Third Streaming

March 23 to May 19, 2012

10 Greene Street, 2nd Floor, between Grand and Canal streets

New York City, 646-370-3877



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Federal*, 10 am, 2003. Cibachrome print, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Third Streaming

The 24 Cibachrome prints on view at Third Streaming feature the same angled shots of the Los Angeles Federal Building, the surrounding sky, grass, trees and nothing more. They were taken during the filming of Mary Ellen Carroll's 24-hour, two-screen film *Federal* (2003) with shots of the same building, viewed from the front and back, over the course of the same day. (The film was screened at the Museum of the Moving Image on March 24th/25th in conjunction with this show.) Even without the extensive bureaucratic background information, including paperwork about the year-long process of her obtaining permission to film — also on view, practically a conceptual work in itself — the repetitive images of the structure reveal solid formal geometrics that immediately illicit thoughts of power, government, access, surveillance and barriers.

It is significant that Carroll, who is not an Angelino (she was born in Illinois and lives and works in New York and Houston), chose L.A. as backdrop for this concept, as well as for her *Kruder and Dorfmeister* series (1999–2000), also on display. The latter is a collection of small black and white photographs of L.A. public libraries that recalls Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) except that Carroll moves in a different direction from Ruscha, as instead of ubiquity, “specifics of place and connotations of Los Angeles,” to quote the press release, are central to the work. In both L.A. series here Carroll is seen capitalizing on the outsider's image of this city as sunny, superficial, and unencumbered by the constraints of history—a land of freedom and reinvention. In one work, by highlighting dull locations that could be Anywhere, U.S.A., and in the other by providing a strict reminder of government power and surveillance, the idea was to create a jarring sense of dislocation between perceptions of L.A. as a special place and realities of American public life everywhere.

I grew up on the Westside of Los Angeles, but that was during the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots, the O.J. Simpson trial, and with a citizen's general knowledge of bad police behavior (profiling, hogtying) as well as the massive California prison industrial complex. So to my particular set of eyes, the prints from *Federal* make a strong yet strangely familiar impact, absent any intentional irony or contrast. They look naked. The *Kruder and Dorfmeister* series of libraries also shows the Los Angeles that I know. The small black and white images of the fronts of these mostly one-story buildings immediately conjure memories of dusty stacks and microfilm machines, elderly librarians and mild,

sunny afternoons. Formally, the small buildings resemble each other more than they differ, creating a repetition in the series of small prints that highlights a contented, perhaps by now outdated, brand of American boredom in the isolated West.



What's interesting is that even though the Federal building is structurally the opposite of these local libraries, and despite the red tape involved in getting access to film it, there is also a strong element of everyday-ness involved necessarily in the building's form and what it represents. This is the place you go to get a passport, a building you might drive past daily without ever actively thinking about it; it blends into the fabric of every commuter's life. But the Federal building, in Carroll's work, is also like the Empire State Building as featured in Andy Warhol's 8-hour *Empire* (1964). Both are symbolic, meant to illicit different things through intensive viewing: for Warhol, the iconic piece of architecture is itself a celebrity, and for Carroll, the political structure embodies the departments it houses, including the FBI, CIA, Homeland Security and LAPD. That viewers are taking the time to look back at these agencies is an intentionally subversive conceptual layer — about as politically effectual as attacking an iceberg with a toothpick, but an excellent lesson in witnessing reality, and done with great visual style.

Mary Ellen Carroll, Kruder and Dorfmeister, 2000. Four of 66 Polaroids, each 3.25 x 4.25 inches. Courtesy of Third Streaming



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