COLLECTOR DAILY

# Kenneth Josephson @Gitterman

By Richard B. Woodward / In Galleries / May 4, 2016

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 43 black-and-white photographs, framed in black/white and matted, and hung against white walls on the two walls of the foyer and the four walls of the gallery's main room. 38 of the works are gelatin silver prints, 4 are gelatin silver print collages, and 1 is a gelatin silver print with halftone postcard collage. All but 9 of the prints are vintage, dating from 1956 to 1980. Sizes vary from roughly 6×6 to 8×12 (or reverse). Fifteen of the prints were done in editions, ranging from 12 to 50. (Installation shots below) A parallel exhibition is on view at Stephen Daiter Gallery in Chicago (here).

The exhibition coincides with but is not based on the release of The Light of Coincidence: The Photographs of Kenneth Josephson, published in 2016 by the University of Texas Press (here). Hardcover, 344 pages, with 254 photographs. Includes a foreword by Gerry Badger and an essay by Lynne Warren. $75. (Cover shot below.)

**Comments/Context:** Twentieth-century art curators no longer overlook photographers who taught at the Institute of Design/Illinois Institute of Technology during the 1940s and '50s. Harry Callahan, Frederick Sommer, Aaron Siskind, and Arthur Siegel, at one time given a condescending pat on the head by promoters of European Abstraction or the New York School, can now be found in most comprehensive surveys of post-World War II art. Photographs by the Chicago School are now treated as significant works in their own right and not as inferior knock-offs of paintings and collages by Max Ernst, Clifford Styll, or Franz Kline.

Students at the ID/IIT program during those years have not been quite so fortunate. Art Sinsabaugh, Ray Metzker, Joseph Jachna, Charles Swedlund, and Joseph Sterling have yet to achieve parity with their peers in the other visual arts or the wider recognition they deserve from the contemporary art market.

Within the crowd of Chicago alumni, Kenneth Josephson (b. 1932) has most regularly slipped over the wall that continues to segregate this group from other artistic innovators in histories of the 1960s and '70s. His photographs of photographs, exemplified by his series, Images within Images and History of Photography, are often called up for duty when curators want to include still photographs in telling the story of Conceptual art.

Rather than highlight that heralded work alone, the present show, a core sample from the first half (1956-80) of his career, chooses to demonstrate the sterling craftsmanship that has marked Josephson's work even at its brainiest. Years before absorbing the virtues of taut design from his

professors in Chicago, he made gorgeous prints. He first studied photography in earnest at the Rochester Institute of Technology and, after military service and help from the G.I. Bill, graduated from there in 1955. A scene he captured in that city the following year was taken in a working class bar/ luncheonette; he stands in the back of the room while the drinkers sit at a table near the front, the open front door and large windows letting in a flood of summer light from the street. Such Rembrandt-style realism must have impressed Callahan and Siskind when Josephson moved to Chicago for graduate school in 1958. Had he wanted to join the ranks of photojournalists in New York, he probably could have excelled there, too.

The selection here from the early ’60s in Chicago owes a lot to Callahan’s experiments with multiple exposures and high contrast. Both photographers liked urban light, how it was filtered through the city’s iron infrastructure and blocked by stone skyscrapers, enisling pedestrians in pools of cold shadows. The linear textures of nature (branches and grasses) were equally appealing. No broader statement about the state of alienation in society should probably be read into these prints; they are about sensuous delight and mystery—the pleasure of tracing the world’s secret language on photographic paper.

Josephson’s most-reproduced photograph dates from 1965. Matthew is a photograph of his adolescent son holding up an upside-down Polaroid of himself against a brick wall. Captured spontaneously, it’s an early example of serialism (the Polaroid of his son was taken only seconds before) and a dual mirror-like self-portrait: a boy is imitating his father by crooking his little finger, as though he, too, were holding a camera.

Another classic was similarly unplanned and grabbed on the fly. Stockholm (1967) depicts a wintry scene in Scandinavia of a Saab parked in a suburban driveway. A dusting of snow has accidentally—and perfectly—outlined in white the sedan’s dark contours on the gravel beside it. Not until he printed the picture did Josephson notice the positive-negative match of machine and Nature.

The many variations that followed over the next 15 years, elaborating on the theme of photography as pictorial riddle, were more deliberate. “It was important to me to learn to think of the photograph as a physical object,” he has said, “because I always had thought of the photograph as an illusionistic space and never a piece of paper that curls up or that you could hold.”

Nine more of these photos within photos are featured here. Typical is Drottningholm, Sweden (1967), in which his extended left arm holds a vintage postcard of an 18th-century lakeside palace while the “real thing” is depicted further back in the picture plane. Neither image is, of course, any more “real” than the other. Gone is the former emphasis on the exquisite print, replaced by a looser humor and a curiosity about photography as a process of making and displacing things—of scenes as objects constructed by the camera.

These self-referential conundrums make Josephson a pivotal figure, a bridge to the artists in many fields who in the ’60s and ’70s took up photography in order to examine (or destroy) its conventions and talk about its systematic artifice. His influence reaches into the present. Lisa Oppenheim, whose The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else (2006) was in the recent Photo-

Poetics survey show at the Guggenheim in New York, is only one of many photographers who have built upon Josephson's oeuvre—in her case by extending his knowing appreciation of tourist clichés into the temporal realm of a slide show.

The University of Texas monograph, the largest since the catalog for the 1999-2000 touring exhibition organized by Sylvia Wolf at the Art Institute of Chicago, substantially expands the scope of Josephson's work in black-and-white—with more of his nudes, altered landscapes, and formal studies of books. But the new survey omits (as does this show) bodies of work found in the first retrospective, such as his SX-70 Polaroids from 1980. (He is less secure with color and much of his post-2000 photography has been monochrome.) The main essays in both catalogs, by Andy Grundberg in the earlier and Lynne Warren in the latter, are excellent in their historical context and analysis of individual pictures.

In addition, Gitterman has unearthed a strange beauty (c. 1963) found in neither book: a liquid-like silvery crowned head, photographed in profile against a black background. Is it an ancient coin from an undocumented civilization? With sinister features and mysterious origins, it resembles nothing so much as a mutant marriage between the Statue of Liberty and one of Frederick Sommer's decapitated chickens.

Perusing the show and the book, many will be reminded of photographs by Paul Strand, Robert Frank, Minor White, Paul Caponigro, Lee Friedlander, Vivian Maier, Ralph Gibson, Abelardo Morell, Lois Conner, and of course Callahan and Metzker. These affinities are less a matter of traditional influence and counter-influence and more the result of a shared set of photographic values. In the middle-decades of the 20th century a group of artists believed in the fine print as the best vehicle for their thoughts about the world. These assumptions are no longer accepted by many younger artists, and haven't been deemed relevant for decades. Josephson may be one of the missing links to the Pictures generation, but at 83 he has remained true to his Chicago training. Whether photographing ideas about photographic reproduction or just reflections of clouds, he can't help making art. Black-and-white doesn't get much more satisfying than in the examples on these walls.

**Collector's POV:** The works in this show range in price from $3500 to $18000, with most of the prints available in the $6000 to $7000 range. Josephson's work has been only intermittently available in the secondary markets in recent years, with only a handful of lots coming up for sale in any given year. Recent prices have ranged from roughly $1000 to $15000.