

ON THE ROCKS

Roni Horn aka Roni Horn

Institute of Contemporary Art

Boston

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Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) rises above the harbor like the giant pilothouse of a grounded tanker. It is surrounded by a vast expanse of parking lots and glass box office buildings—some of which sit empty. Perched above the ocean, it has floundered just a few hundred miles away from art's central marketplace—New York City—never utterly swallowed by the sea but never, it seems, moving (as the saying goes) “full steam ahead.”

A dulled predictability ribs the museum's programming like the whalebone splinters in a Victorian corset. Recent shows have featured the overly precious sculptures of Tara Donovan and the banal revolutionary graphic chants of Shepard Fairey. These crowd-pleasing efforts—including the arrest by Boston Police of Fairey at the opening of his 2009 show—contain the shrill notes of a carnival barker and none of the bite or excitement of anything worthwhile. To be fair, these shows are on the museum circuit and the ICA would be foolish to turn up its nose at these staunchly popular “acts,” gilded with mainstream acclaim.

Arriving recently, already stamped with the approval of the Whitney Museum and the Tate Modern, the ICA's newest show floundered as well. Roni Horn—an American artist noted for the soothing wattage of her work and the soft glow it emits—was represented by over fifty works dating back to 1974. They include sculptures, photographs, and drawings. Strangely, regardless of medium, they all register at a pre-ordained temperature: the sort of ambient radiance familiar to anyone who has ever been inside a chic hotel bar. This odd effect dulls rather than engages the senses.

A five-ton pink chunk of glass cast by the artist sat placidly in the museum lobby—a familiar-seeming oddity, as singular in its bulk as it is unsatisfying in its sculptural presence. It is a weighty thing, unanimated by the light, and lacks that deadly shimmer that attracts our attention to rough gemstones and jewels. Rather, it sat like a discarded oversized piece of candy on the museum floor, like five tons of empty calories. Nearby, a cluster of self-portraits hung, the “aka” of the show's title. Here, the artist casts herself, shifting age and gender in a dispiriting series of photographs that miscalculates their effect, remaining a bland costume change rather than a gender-scrambling revelation.

In “You are the Weather” (1995) (a series of one-hundred photographs of a woman emerging from an Icelandic hot spring), Horn conflates the intensity of a slowly shifting gaze with the desire to watch it unfold. Without a narrative, or visual prompts, an element of tediousness surfaces. Whether it is a tear or just a bead of water clinging to the woman's face



is a question that dissipates quickly as the glacial boredom of the series unravels photograph by photograph. Fittingly, the days of torrential rain that preceded the exhibition caused a dozen or so of the photographs to be taken down due to water damage from the leaky ceiling—changing little.

In the piece *Is This Me* (2002), Horn employs the same technique, that is, the display of multiple images. This time it is photographs of her niece displayed in grids across two facing walls. At first glance, the images seem identical, but further inspection yields small differences in the photographs, with minor gestures changed. The young girl runs the gamut of photo-booth poses in an animated way, and what Horn expects is that the momentary confusion introduces questions of identity and portraiture, freighting the piece with serious intent. Instead, you are engaged by the minutia of change, looking from wall to wall identifying the differences in the photographs and ultimately dragged along in what amounts to a solemn bit of child's play.

Birds (2008), which is a grouping of photographs of the backs of birds' heads, is an idea of Horn's that works. With the birds stuffed, the taxidermy captures a stillness that resonates well out of proportion to what you might expect. The elegance of the lines is startling while resisting the high gloss generally found in Horn's other work. In this case, it is fewer photographs rather than a barrage of multiple images that make an impact. One wishes she exhibited this restraint elsewhere.

What does not work here is the uncertainty of an artist's vision meeting a museum culture that thrives on shows where the content is bloated and overwrought. It is a partnership based on constantly saying “yes” and being mutually self-assuring. These confidences, in the actual sense, are destructive impulses that only embellish the mediocre while intending to service the good. Seemingly, what has been forgotten is that sometimes the best thing that a curator can say to an artist is “no.”

ROBERT MOELLER is a writer and painter living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A new exhibition of his paintings will be on view this July at HallSpace in Boston.

Above

Pink Tons (2008) by Roni Horn; courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth; © Roni Horn; photo by John Kennard