

Brandon Ballengée: Creature Discomfort

Robert Shuster

Flocks of birds fall from the sky. Frogs emerge from ponds malformed. An eyeless baby dolphin washes up on a beach. Is environmental catastrophe looming? Brandon Ballengée—a researcher of amphibian abnormalities who leans toward this ominous view—has put together an unsettling mix of art and science with an unabashed activist agenda.



Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
Leggy: Ballengée's *DFA 83, Karkinos*

Details

Brandon Ballengée: 'Collapse: The Cry of Silent Forms'

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
212-226-3232, feldmangallery.com

His stunning—and disturbing—portraits of Californian frogs dominate the exhibit. Ballengée treated the dead specimens with special chemicals and dyes that highlight bones and cartilage with vibrant blues and reds, then scanned them at high resolution to make poster-size enlargements. The pop-art colors soup up the freaky sights: all sorts of extra limbs that grew at hideous angles. Bear witness, the images tell us, and shiver.

In a second room, there's a large pyramidal arrangement of 370 jarred sea creatures that represent the range of species found in the Gulf of Mexico—a habitat still under threat from BP's massive oil spill, which some scientists believe might lie 3,000 feet down, in a mass the size of Oklahoma. A slideshow of pictures (including that dolphin) solicited from Gulf residents suggests the horrifying effects. The media have largely forgotten about the Deepwater Horizon disaster and those frog troubles (first reported in the 1990s), but Ballengée's work—in both the lab and the studio—should make us all fearful again.

'A SHORT HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY'

By no means comprehensive, this brisk survey at ICP takes its title (and theme) from a 1931 essay by cultural critic Walter Benjamin, who marveled at the enchanting power of the photographic portrait. The viewer, he wrote, searches the image "for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now . . . to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it." The collection offers scene after scene for making those kinds of pointed connections across time.

In Danny Lyon's stark Prairieville, Louisiana (1964), you try to understand why a young couple, gazing across an empty field, looks so forlorn. Larry Clark gives us the complete opposite—a visceral thrill of debauchery in his provocative high-angle shot from 1971 of a naked young woman, astride a man, receiving a hypodermic in her arm. For a sequence on the Vietnam War, Larry Burrows captured raw terror in the face of James Farley, who kneels in a helicopter, rising from a battle while a fellow soldier lies before him dying. Over and over, you're reminded that photography's ability to freeze time—taken for granted now—has been nothing less than profound.

Perhaps the most delightful example of Benjamin's nested future occurs in a tiny snapshot of unknown origin. Two pre-adolescent girls cavort at a summer picnic: One devours a slice of watermelon while the other innocently (but alluringly) removes her shirt. The beautiful composition contains an instant of pubescent joy, but also includes—like many of the show's pictures—the aching mystery of all the years that came before and after. International Center of Photography, 1133 Sixth Avenue, 212-857-0000, icp.org. Through September 2.

BASTIENNE SCHMIDT: 'SILHOUETTE VESSELS'

The photographs of Latin American funerals in Bastienne Schmidt's 1996 book *Vivir la Muerte*—her artistic debut—don't immediately suggest a connection to her latest efforts: spare, exquisite paintings of amphora-like containers. But both projects, separated by more than two decades, reflect the loss of her father, who died when Schmidt was only 25. Back in 1988, shooting bereavement rituals in Peru and Colombia let her deal with her own immediate grief. Here, the meditative series of mandala-like forms is a gesture, in part, of remembrance—in her youth, Schmidt often accompanied her archeologist father on digs in Greece for ancient pottery. Drawn on thick paper, the vessels (oval, circular, triangular) are filled with Mediterranean colors. Schmidt gently mixes thinned-out acrylics with actual espresso, making evanescent stains of rich blues and sandy browns—a shifting, hazy, memory-like wash.

The rounded, minimalist shapes suggest, too, a feminist symbology—a more abstract instance of the artist's recent explorations of female identity. Empathy, mothering, and the womb all appear to one degree or another, rendered with soft integrity. Ricco/Maresca Gallery, 529 West 20th Street, 212-627-4819, riccomaresca.com. Through June 16.