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**Robert Heinecken:
Object Matter**
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By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

When Robert Heinecken's photo-collages of sex and violence were exhibited in New York during his lifetime (1931-2006)—and galleries and museums gave him regular exposure from the 1970s to the 1990s—they never enjoyed general approval.

Typecast as a Los Angeles artist when that term was a slur instead of a credential, he could be dismissed by polite East Coast art circles as loud and obnoxious, along with his fellow West Coast aesthetic scofflaws Edward Kienholz and Lynn Foulkes.

Fine-art photography had assumed for many years that artists needed cameras to translate a personal vision of the world. Heinecken obviated that. Trained as a print-maker, he was more apt after the 1960s to rework existing images he scavenged from periodicals and converted into photograms.

Nor was he concerned with the poetics of self-expression. A satirist whose chief target was the American soft spots of overabundance and complacency, he liked to keep audiences guessing about his ultimate aims.

He wasn't comfortably accepted in scenes beyond art photography, either. Women were suspicious about the graphic material he lifted from porn magazines. The jokes in his work could also be too explicit or puerile for Minimalist and Conceptual artists trying to outdo one another in affectless irony.

With "Object Matter," the current Heinecken retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the artist goes from outlier to prophet. Media appropriation, which Heinecken helped to reinvigorate in the 1960s after its heyday in the 1930s, is now standard practice. When the current image-besotted generation researches its ancestry, it will find traces of his photo-based social analysis in its DNA.

Curator Eva Respini is aware that Heinecken is both a pioneer of the mash-up and a tough sell in certain quarters. By positioning "Visual Poem/About the Sexual Education of a Young Girl" (1965) near the show's entrance, she may be trying to shield him from feminist critics. (Good luck with that.)

In this black-and-white photo-sculpture, he puts his towheaded daughter, sitting Buddha-like, at the center of a crucifix. Surrounded with images of baby



'Recto/Verso #2' (1988).

be dumb. Ms. Respini has segregated some of his weakest experiments—the toothless "TV/Time Environment" (1970) and "TV Dinner" (1971)—in a back corner gallery. History has been no kinder to his puzzle sculptures from the '60s: photographed pieces of female bodies mounted on slices of wood that can be rearranged at will. Displayed here in a vitrine, they look like relics from a swingers' cocktail party.

Nothing he exhibited, however, was carelessly done. Old ideas were constantly refined. "Recto/Verso" (1988) is an updated version of "Are You Rea" (1964-68), a series in which he made outrageous collages by merging translucent front and back images taken from pages in women's fashion magazines.

In both series, he let chance guide the picture formation while controlling the final result with deft handling of print tones. By illustrating how the photographs in *Vogue*, designed to sell cosmetics, food, sunglasses, clothing and jewelry to women, are not very different from the strategies used to arouse men in *Playboy*, "Recto/Verso" may be the most pointed and elegant artistic statement he ever made.

What gives his mockery of American advertising its lasting appeal is that he secretly acknowledges the hold these pornographic tropes have on him. He seems scornful but amazed by how successfully they grab the eyes and brains of women and men alike. If sex weren't so effective in selling almost everything to everyone, there wouldn't be so much of it in our media, decade after decade.

At New York art openings, Heinecken could be mistaken for a genteel hippie, with his oxford shirts and pony tail. In fact, he had once been a U.S. Marine fighter pilot. A refusal to be easily categorized, as either an artist or a citizen, permeates his work.

MoMA has secured him a place here within Pop and Conceptual traditions but doesn't substantially alter the view presented in the 2007 memorial exhibition at the Museum of Photography in Chicago, or in the 1980 midcareer retrospective at The Friends of Photography in Carmel, Calif. This fine, varied and comprehensive selection is more of a lovely reminder of the inventive ways he found to reuse and print photographic images while shocking and amusing us about their sometimes insidious cultural ubiquity.

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dolls, a naked Barbie, a buttoned-up Geisha figure, paper cut-outs of men in tuxedos and women in bridal gowns, as well as toys of Charlie Brown and Donald Duck, the 6-year-old represents the worries of any parent hoping to neutralize the commercial blandishments—innocent or not—that entice every American child while growing up.

At the same time, the show does not hide Heinecken's fixation—not too strong a word—on undressed grown-up women. Meeting visitors as they walk in the door is "Figure Horizon #1" (1971), a fragmented female nude stretched across 10 panels like a hilly landscape.

A satirist whose chief target was complacency and overabundance.

His series "Lingerie for a Feminist Suntan" (1973) combines an actual bra and underpants on coat hangers with hand-colored photos of naked women's torsos. Clothes can mask skin like a photographic negative on paper, the pieces coyly suggest. Photosensitive linen behind one of the intimate ensembles darkens every time it is exposed to light.

In their frank eroticism and unconventional methods, much of his '60s and '70s work bears the imprint of other artists, most noticeably his elders Man Ray and Hans Bellmer, as well as contemporaries Wallace Berman and Les Krims.

Heinecken shared with the Dadaists and Surrealists an obvious glee in provocation. He was also obviously provoked

himself by emanations from the mass media. Although he spent much of his life in and around Los Angeles, founding the University of California, Los Angeles's photography program in 1963, he ignored Hollywood in his art. It was New York and its glamour industries—Madison Avenue advertising, women's fashion magazines and television network news—that inspired his most caustic work.

One response, starting in the late '60s and continuing into the late '90s, was to alter existing magazine covers and layouts. Images were combined by overprinting, or by cutting figures out of one periodical and putting them in another, or by mixing incongruent genres—say, a comic book with an issue of *Time* or *Newsweek*.

In his loony scenarios, a bare-breasted woman in reversed tones shares a page with Richard Nixon in the Oval Office. Richard Avedon's portrait of Marilyn Monroe wears a dress made out of Oscar Levant's ravaged face. One recurring figure was a smiling, androgynous Vietnamese soldier holding up a pair of decapitated men's heads. He/she might appear against a woman's legs advertising a razor or a pair of pantyhose.

When he was done, Heinecken would sometimes slip these "compromised" magazines into waiting rooms at offices or store racks. Ms. Respini has smartly arranged four long rows of examples like a newsstand.

"I sometimes visualize myself as a bizarre guerrilla, investing in a kind of humorous warfare . . . without consistent rationale," the artist wrote in 1974.

In his reluctance to conform to the usual photographic modes, Heinecken was not afraid to risk failure. His satires could