

Nils Nova: Memory Confronted.

The photo album, firm black pages in linen covers with a cord binding filled with mostly black-and-white or pale pictures, is a classical repository of memory. In the present case, a hint of nostalgia – we have seen its kind before in some family treasure chest – makes us look back and wonder: Is that really ...? When was that? Where are we? The moment we begin wondering and asking questions, certainty vanishes altogether and the collection of pictures is transformed into a gallery of ambivalent figures that is astonishingly unsettling. I've seen this person before, the situation is familiar, wasn't it ...? The harder we try to place the picture, the more we find ourselves facing the inevitability of transience, so that even the realm of the dead makes an appearance like a curious dream, a simultaneous parallel universe spreading out along the immeasurable and imaginary temporal continuum between the two covers of the album.

Nils Nova's photo album contains some 70 photographs from the past 10 years and from a wide variety of sources: snapshots taken from a moving train, portraits of people he knows, pictures of film stars and artists, press photographs, rooms and the occasional painting. They are pictures whose intensity stems from their own ambiguity. But it is through montage that the artist ultimately quickens his iridescent material, lending it the mystification and enchantment (to give a positive connotation to the effects of uncertainty and deception) that lie at the heart of his work. He transports us into a Lewis Carroll land of astonishment, where mirrors become permeable and have two sides, where the unfettered gaze of childhood – »so rich in not yet knowing, so rich in extent,« as Henri Michaux says – opens up and begins to flow. Elsewhere we find ourselves mired in a dilemma, as in Antonioni's »Blow-Up«, where sensual perception and imagination have become inextricably confused and the appearance of the world can no longer be objectified, not even in a photograph. The same sensations are evoked in the exhibitions that Nova stages. He uses several media – painting, photography, video, installation – literally superimposing them at times to create a complex system of relations, in which we lose all sense of time and space. We are reminded of the workings of memory: pictures surface, take shape, blur and fade, then become sharper again alongside other fragments of perception, and yet we can never pin them down with certainty. It is a game of illusion in the »Twilight«, as the artist eloquently titled one of his staged works last spring. The latent dimension of dreams that sometimes emanates from Nova's works is inconceivable without the artist's extremely lucid study and reflection on the motif, for it is through the latter that he generates the desired atmospheric effects. At stake here is not merely the sophisticated manipulation of our perception but above all the precision with which Nova addresses his choice of means and media. The room, mirrored in a room, for example, is generally located in the real room of his presentation: the trick is not based on a false bottom but is firmly rooted in reality and produces wondrous insights.

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Max Wechsler

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