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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; From a Printer to an Artist on His Own

November 28, 1997 Margarett Loke

Tom Baril was a 27-year-old student and aspiring photographer at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan when Robert Mapplethorpe called its employment office, looking for a printer. Mr. Baril was sent. That was in 1979, and Mr. Baril went on to become the controversial artist's brilliant printer.

But Mr. Baril's own photography was eclipsed, if not squashed. And only in 1992, three years after Mapplethorpe's death from AIDS, did Mr. Baril begin photographing still lifes, including flowers -- a subject, among others, that Mapplethorpe was known for.

Now, five years later, Mr. Baril has finally created his own gently luminous signature work. "Quiet Grace," his first solo Manhattan exhibition, at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, includes not only his flower studies but also photographs of seascapes and New York City skyscrapers. All except two were made this year.

A decade of being the printmaker for a photographer who reveled in the super-outre seems to have made Mr. Baril head in the opposite direction. Where Mapplethorpe's pictures are loudly transgressive, Mr. Baril's are quietly contemplative. Where Mapplethorpe insisted on controlled studio conditions to create his perfectly pristine images, Mr. Baril uses a primitive pinhole camera in addition to the conventional view camera, and often leaves around the edges of his prints the raw marks left when a Polaroid positive is separated from the negative.

Part of the dreamy, smooth-as-silk look in Mr. Baril's minimalist seascapes comes from his use, since 1992, of the pinhole, which, because of its extremely slow speed, cannot register movement. The pinhole, the basis for the camera obscura described by Leonardo da Vinci in his notebooks, works this way: light passing through a small hole on one side of a darkened box casts the outside image on the opposite side of the box. The tiny hole is the lens, and light-sensitive film or paper is mounted opposite the hole. There is no light meter, and the perspective for far and near is the same.

Initially, to help compose and judge exposures, Mr. Baril used the Polaroid Type 55 film, which gave him an instant print and a negative. But for the seascapes and certain other images in the show, he used grainless 4-by-5 sheet film. For more detailing, he has begun to use a 4-by-5 view camera. But because he gives his large-size gelatin silver prints a selenium (red-brown) tone before finishing them in a tea bath, the differences between his use of a no-frills camera and a view camera may not be apparent to a casual eye.

In ''Lumahai Beach, No. 1'' (1997), the waves crashing to shore look as light as air, their frothy whiteness contrasted with the smooth dark of the beach. ''Ponquoque Sunset'' (1997) is far more surreal. Here, the sea rolling up to the beach resembles misty clouds, as though part of the sky has come to rest in the water while the remaining sky is streaked with white trails. Both pictures were taken with a pinhole.

In ''Ponquoque Beach, No. 5'' (1997), which was taken with a view camera, what would have been a blurry wash is now three marvelously contrasting sets of sea waves. They go from broad vertical lines left on the beach, to indistinct horizontal lines on the water washing to shore, to dappled water on the horizon. The sea creeping up the beach leaves behind a row of lovely bubbles.

It is Mr. Baril's flower studies, taken with a view camera, that are most likely to lead a viewer to compare them with Mapplethorpe's, and Mr. Baril's images actually gain from the comparison. Photographed at the prime of their transient lives under just-so studio conditions, the flowers in Mapplethorpe's prints share a uniform icy perfection. In Mr. Baril's hands, though, botanicals are living, breathing, even blemished things that also have luscious forms.

The humble dahlia is a statuesque flower in ''Solarized Dahlia'' (1997), its magnificence and tactility accentuated by the Polaroid smear marks cutting into the petals and leaves at the top and bottom edges of the frame.

The image of the underside of an equally modest flower, the morning glory, is both strongly sculptural and delicately fragile. Mr. Baril is good with tight close-ups of flowers, their backgrounds either black or in various shades of textured gray. When he stands a distance away to photograph flowers in a pot or a trio of blooms with stalks winding up or down, the images are pro forma or precious.

Mr. Baril also has a problem giving new life to buildings. ''Chrysler Building'' (1997) is finely detailed and expertly printed but says little beyond the familiar. Far more

problematic, though, is Mr. Baril's use of the selenium toning and tea bath. These give his prints a pronounced vintage veneer, but instant age, like instant youth, rings false.

Still, Mr. Baril has achieved a lot just in the last year. That much is apparent if one compares ''Quiet Grace'' with ''Tom Baril,'' his recent book of photographs taken between 1993 and 1996. A disconcertingly large number of the book's images are earnest imitations: of Paul Outerbridge's still lifes, of Karl Blossfeldt's botanicals, of Irving Penn's calligraphic nudes of hefty women, of Edward Weston's cross section of a seashell, of Margaret Bourke-White's New York City skyscrapers, of Karl Struss's Manhattan skyline seen through a bridge's cable suspensions. It was as though in venturing from under Mapplethorpe's shadow, Mr. Baril was trying on for size the work of various photographic masters.

''Quiet Grace'' shows he can afford to be his own man.

''Tom Baril: Quiet Grace'' is at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, 52 East 76th Street, Manhattan, through Dec. 6.

Photo: ''Morning Glory'' (1997), a gelatin silver print by Tom Baril, is at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery. (Bonni Benrubi Gallery)