

Art: Staring Down The Camera's Eye

By GRACE GLUECK

WE are obviously at the point in photography where some younger practitioners are using the medium to question its own premises—in other words, making photographs that test suppositions about photography.

At the John Gibson Gallery, 392 West Broadway, the work of John Hilliard, a young Englishman who started out as a sculptor, is a case in point. His color photos come in sequences of three: That is, each of three pictures presents the same staged situation, seen from three different focal points, with an overall "caption" that remains constant.

One sequence, bearing the legend, "She Observed Her Reflection in the Glass," starts with a close-up profile of a woman looking into a mirror, in which may be seen the faint, nearly abstract shape of a female nude. In the second photo, we all but lose the mirror-gazer's face, but the nude in the mirror emerges as a reflection of the Velazquez painting known as the "Rokeby Venus," in which a cherub holds a looking glass up to the face of a reclining nude. In the third photo, the painting of the nude recedes and we see in the mirror—still observed by the original gazer—the clear but background reflection of a young woman standing in a doorway.

In all three pictures the camera position is fixed, as is the picture content. But by a simple shift of focus—from foreground to middleground to background, the legend "She Observed Her Reflection in the Glass" describes different facts: the viewer observing herself, then observing the Venus observing herself, then observing the reflection of another woman.

By means of such sequences, which he says are not meant to convey emotional effects, Mr. Hilliard stresses the ambiguity of the photographic image, so taken for granted as reliable reportage of "facts" and events; and he questions the truth of our reliance on photographic documentation. He also intends a criticism of the way artists use photographs that are often not of esthetic interest in themselves to "document" events of their own conception. "A photograph should have at least the esthetic quality of what it replaces," he says, quite correctly.

As a demonstration, this one tends to suffer from the didacticism that makes much of conceptual art so tiresome (and isn't the premise that photographs may lie confounded by the fact that each of Mr. Hilliard's own pictures is, by its very change in focus, a convincing presentation of that particular focal truth?).

But apart from their function as criticism, the photographs work. The artist contends that the sequences, though they report on outside staged events, can live on their own esthetic

merits, unlike the conceptualists' documentary photographs, which are not works of art in themselves. Surprisingly, they do. They are well-enough made to succeed as small fictions, surviving the explanations behind them.

Other shows you might want to catch:

Harry Leigh, Keith Long (O.K. Harris, 383 West Broadway): Both these sculptors show wall pieces in wood, but there mutuality ends. Harry Leigh uses wood strips to give slight and subtle definition to flat planes of space. The simplest piece is a rectangle having two sides of straight strips, two sides bowed. A more complicated work deploys bricks staggered out in an open-ended V to be topped by a bowed slat. In a third piece, a vertical polygon is rescued from rectangularity by an intrusion of bricks that thrusts up in a line from the bottom. The look of the pieces and their materials suggest the foundations for primitive kinds of shelter. Not the most assertive work of its kind, but it has presence.

Keith Long continues along the lines of what he showed last year: totemic "artifacts" created by roughing up the surfaces of flat wooden slabs made by binding slats together. His scraping, scratching, patching, burning and carving (sometimes he incises an insect shape, like a dragonfly) give the pieces almost a narrative quality. Some of them have the look of abstract tableaux. It's a skilled performance.

Madeleine Gekiere (Aaron Berman Gallery, 50 West 57th Street): This is a show of paintings and drawings, but the drawings come off best. Done with the most delicate of brush and pencils and a truly authoritative whimsy, they convey dreams about the body with Kleelike finesse. "A Torso's Dream of Nevermind," for instance, is built up with shadings, lines, cilia, to become a torso that sees itself as a cliff; in "Torso in Transit Toward 20th-Century Art" the subject flies through space shedding history with happy abandon.

Yvonne Thomas (Ericson Gallery, 23 East 74th Street): Casting about for a new medium, Yvonne Thomas came up with one that many artists are turning to: paper. And then she discovered the joys of folding it. On each square of paper she draws a 12-part grid, creates varying chromatic effects on the surface by means of pastel, and marks the grids off strongly with here and there a bold diagonal thrust.

Each grid gives her a chance at adjustment: Sometimes she turns one back to form a flap of contrasting color, others she cuts away; and in the center of the work, by dint of cutting and pasting, she contrives a long vertical fold that gives a sculptural effect. It is all done with a pleasing sureness and, despite their geometric "control," the constructions are wonderfully free.