The Addison Gallery of American Art on Phillips Academy’s Andover, Massachusetts campus is one of the most comprehensive of its kind in the world. Impressively, its collection includes nearly 22,000 objects that span a timeline that begins in the early 18th century and ends today. As if that weren’t enough, admission to the Addison is notoriously free.

My visit felt as expansive as its collection; meandering through the space felt less like a gallery visit than a trip back in time, to be sure. The purpose of my visit, however, was singular: to explore the gallery’s latest exhibition “Language, Sequence, Structure: Photographic Works by Lew Thomas, Donna-Lee Phillips, and Hal Fischer,” which will be on view through January 23. With the promise of these three artistic powerhouses on display, I had little doubt of returning home disappointed. This prediction was correct.

Thomas, Phillips and Fischer were Bay Area collaborators throughout the 1970s and ‘80s. Their partnership – creative through and through – sought to emblazon a “new photography” as a direct revolt against the medium’s purist Californian tradition. Overly focused on craftsmanship and emotion, so the trio claimed, the history of photography in California was generally seen by the public as a representation of the state’s unequivocal beauty; sweeping vistas and the vast expanse of its interior are notable themes that also exactly illustrate Thomas, Phillips and Fischer’s aversion. As longtime collaborators, the trio sought to stun and disrupt this tradition and thereby redefine the way Californian photography was viewed. Their resulting collaborative body of work was impressive; and, on full display at the Addison, serves as a celebration of theory and conceptualism as seen in photography.

Born in 1941, Donna-Lee Phillips spent much of her youth working in carnivals around the country. It could be argued that these journeys infused her with a keen awareness of the proliferation of color; or it could be said that they introduced her to the complex relationship between viewer and viewed, audience and performer, text and image. I realized these possibilities acutely as I lingered beside one of her most famous photographic works, “What Do I Mean When I Say Red? What Do You Mean?” Multi-part and united by the color red, photographs of red wine to Mao Zedong to the American flag only half complete the work; a single sentence beneath each photograph says, “What do you mean when I say red?” Tongue-in-cheek, the phrase means more than what it appears to – exactly as the artist herself intended.
This is a work that encourages deeper thought about color and its underlying cultural associations, certainly, but more importantly it is a work that brings to light the secret life of things. To Phillips and perhaps many of us today, that secret life is becoming increasingly important to acknowledge and accept as not something but as a series of somethings—parts of a whole that can (and will) stand in opposition to others at times. We owe it to ourselves to respect this tension, live with it, and if we’re lucky – see its value just like Phillips saw in the versatile yet dissonant meanings of the color red.

Moving on to Hal Fischer’s work, it was difficult not to gravitate toward his 1977 piece, “Blue Handkerchief, Red Handkerchief.” Standing side-by-side with backs to the camera, two figures are seen, each with a handkerchief in their pocket. Though the photograph is in black-and-white, we are made to assume that the figure on the left is holding the blue handkerchief, while the one on the right, the red. Superimposing each figure is a block of text that expounds upon what each handkerchief symbolizes metaphorically, from the personality of the wearer to the predicted behavioral tendencies of those who wear the same.


Though “Blue Handkerchief, Red Handkerchief” saw its first gallery wall in the late ’70s, I find it difficult not to read the work in the context of today’s heated political climate, which very often feels like a drumbeat of red against blue (or blue against red). However, I try to strain myself; enmeshing a decades-old artwork into current events is tricky business that would likely lead to conclusions that the artists themselves would have never anticipated, however enlightening they may be.

The work of Lew Thomas, who just recently died in August, stuck with me long after I left the Addison. Possibly due to its Muybridgeian aesthetic, or the almost effortless way it celebrates the most mundane aspects of modern American life, Thomas’ work left me wondering if I’ve been appreciative enough of life’s smaller moments, or if I’ve felt the full weight of how those very moments, so often forgotten before even realized, might in fact be among the richest in life.

One of Thomas’ works, “OPENING & CLOSING THE GARAGE DOOR: 2 Perspectives,” is supposedly a critique of traditional notions of beauty that had been so heavily photographed at the time. This is a series of 24 photographs that capture exactly what the work’s title claims to: the opening and closing of a garage door. I was moved by these images because they were unabashedly real. Thomas made it his life’s work to “do something unique in photography or drop it altogether.” I believe he succeeded. His work, here and elsewhere for years to come, is a fine celebration of his memory – and an artist who infused the everyday with forgotten magic.

I left the Addison planning my return. I also left with questions; how should we go about understanding the world? What about understanding people? Things get even more complicated when we leave the realm of things and enter those of people; personality is complicated, and behavioral traits can be quantified but not qualified uniformly across time and space – that’s the work of gods.

At best, photography is a lucid counterpart to the world we experience; at worst, a hard stance on the way it is for all. Luckily, Thomas, Phillips and Fischer got this. They knew that a captured image offers only one invitation into a single worldview; and, like Phillips argued photographically with rebellious eloquence, what may be true for one person may be false for another. Red isn’t red to the colorblind, and there’s beauty in that.

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