

THE INDEPENDENT

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The Heavyweight 1988 Camerawork Gallery London.

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PHOTOGRAPHY / Philip Core on the installations of M Rooms with a view

PHOTOGRAPHY is increasingly divided into two streams: one is an archival devotion to the documentary print, displayed like an etching and collected like a book; the other, a modernist spearhead free from much of the cant attached to similarly experimental painting.

The Camerawork Gallery displays both areas of the art, maintaining a lively and professional respect for photography in a highly unphotogenic stretch of the Roman Road. Their current exhibition is uncompromisingly in the second, avant-garde category, and makes one realise how much more accessible, even cosy, installation pieces are when they use photographs as a primary medium and not an incidental adjunct to obscure pretensions in other media.

The show comprises two rooms which house the pieces specially made for it by Max Couper and Ben Luxmoore. The gallery space, with its surprising, pseudo-Bauhaus frontage, is well suited to wall-sized installations. While so much money is spent by the Barbican or the NPG to exhibit archive photographs that would look perfectly good in small, inexpensive venues, it is exciting to see just how stylish, intelligent and significant these two pieces look in such a modest setting. The fact that the gallery is not geared to selling is a pity for the artists it shows. The work, in this case, amply deserves a good salesman.

The first room, containing Ben Luxmoore's "transformer" pieces, is a pop-pun on its own technology. Large

clusters of coloured tungsten lights adorn the walls, each arranged to form a line drawing in the manner of neon signs. The originality and artistry lies in the difference — here the lights are each short — eight-inch — units, joined by delicate spider webs of wiring which fan out from a white plastic pedal-bin on the floor. These contain the eponymous "transformers" and are joined to large framed photographs of nice-looking art-schoolish youths or a mother and baby.

The reference to Frankenstein, and his bride, is obvious, made all the funnier when the photo models turn out so ordinary, and the light drawings form a head of Mickey Mouse. The transformers themselves, when you open the bins, squeak like mice. It is no breakthrough in the art of photography, but it is a group of very amusing, technically superb *jeux d'esprit*.

Does such work belong in a gallery named after Alfred Steiglitz's seminal Edwardian magazine of photography? I think any collector who has already got a wall full of vintage prints would be doing their décor a favour by acquiring an example of this sort of innovation. The delicacy of the effect is far removed from comparable neon extravaganzas in discos and music business offices. This is certainly artistry, it may be art, and it incorporates photographs elegantly, essentially and — it is tempting to say — to electrifying effect.

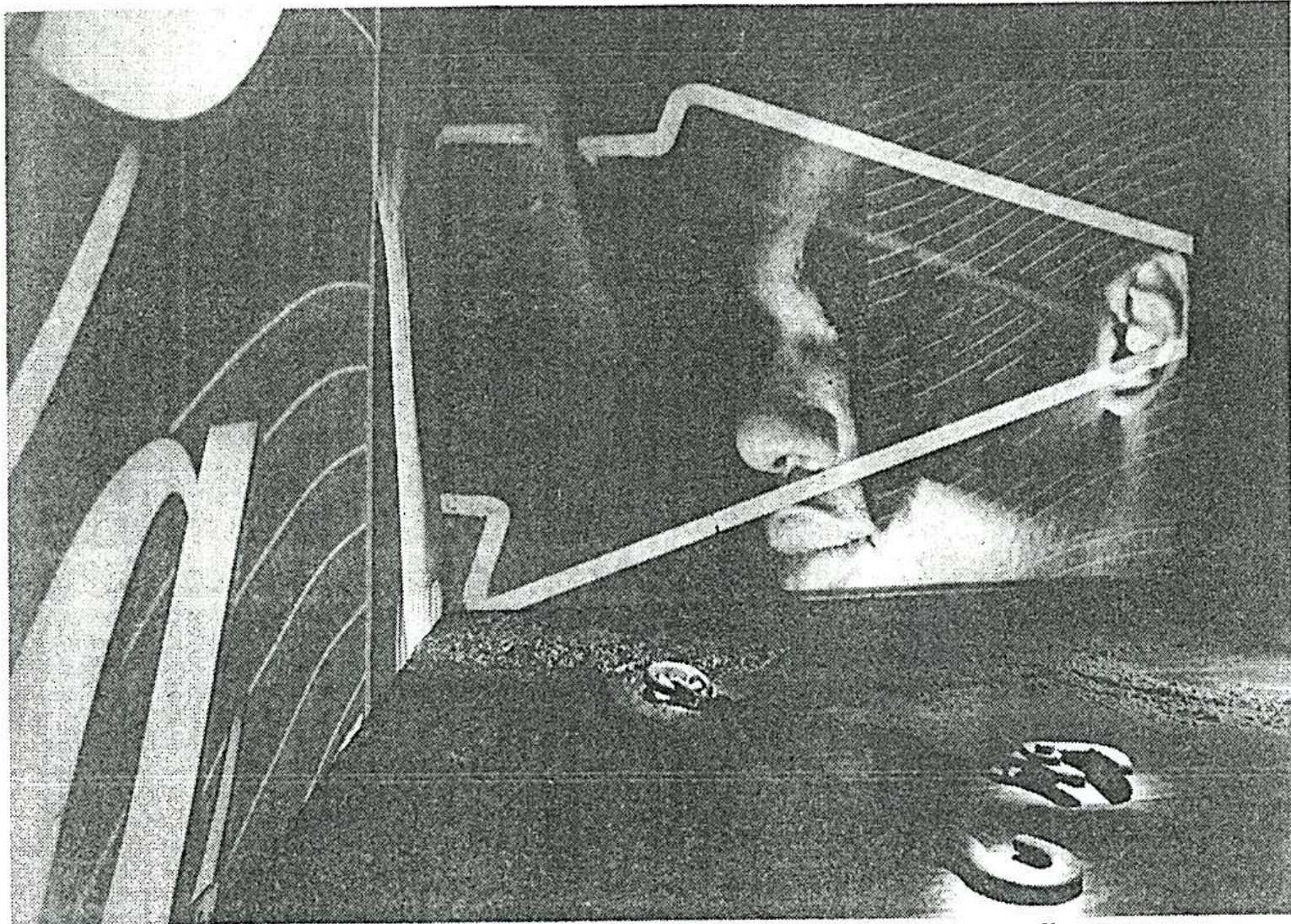
If, however, you feel a Luxmoore would keep you awake, I wonder if you could resist having a Max Couper? His piece takes up two walls of a darkened

20ft room, a corner of which has been highlighted with whitewash that runs out halfway across the floor. A sophisticated, computer-run slide-projector fires images at the white walls. Over the machine's gentle click hovers a rather beautiful, Debussy-ish piece of music by Couper himself — which suggests that photo-artists may start with an entirely different sensory orientation to the painterly one by which they are so often judged. In the middle of the floor, half on the white paint, half off, lie two rusted bits of industrial detritus: a giant spanner and a pulley-hook about the same size.

In this environment, with its nightclub shadows, its working-class memorabilia, and its poetic music, a modest, glowing and sensual spectrum of pictures fall across each other in kaleidoscopic variation: the Coca-Cola sign from Piccadilly Circus; a muscled forearm; abstract neon from Downtown Anywhere; a grinning black face, lit gold; a fist; the back of the head. These images are 10ft high, related by the glow which all projected transparencies have, and by the artist's choice of reds, oranges and golden ochres on black as his colour range. The effect, which may sound hectic and trendy, is sedate, calming and sensual.

A simple determinant of an art-object's worthiness of the name is the question: "Does it do what it set out to do?" or: "Does it make us feel what the artist intended?" If respect for a south London black boxer, who is also his friend, and a vision of the boxer as pop

Max Couper and Ben Luxmoore at the Camerawork Gallery



Max Couper's *Heavyweight*: 'the effect is sedate, calming and sensual'

star — glamorous and ordinary as a Coke — was in the artist's heart, I can only say I felt all those things very clearly.

I stress these criteria because it is all too easy, with a postcard attitude towards photography, to dismiss installations as artsy self-indulgence unrelated to real life or great art. It seems to me

that both of these pieces display a new confidence in an accessible but distinguished manner. And after all Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of arrested motion caused excitement, not so much in book form, as when he showed them in projected animation on his cartwheel "zoöpraxiscope" in 1880. There is, in fact, a very considerable his-

tory of photographic art that cannot be described as either flat-printed or cinematic. The sad thing is that such work is today usually confined to museums or one-off displays commissioned for arts festivals.

□ *Max Couper and Ben Luxmoore, Camerawork Gallery, 121 Roman Road, London E2.*