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ART

Missed moment for Dutch photos

Art Institute's exhibit too late, out of context; collection loses impact

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Tribune art critic

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Although casual museum-going audiences seldom think of it, the timing of contemporary exhibitions at museums is important in determining the impression viewers get of the art.

If a show is too early, marketplace rush registers stronger than museum deliberation and the works' achievement may seem inflated. If an exhibition is too late, exposure to imitators may have blunted the works' original impact.

"In Sight: Contemporary Dutch Photographs from the Collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam," the new exhibition that presents older and recent work by 13 contemporary artists at the Art Institute of Chicago, falls into the second category. We've seen so many artists doing the same sorts of things that it's hard to imagine these works not only closer to the time they were fresh but also where they meant the most, in a Dutch context.

Here, after all, are images mostly shot in color and presented in a size approaching that of a small billboard. This has been the look of contemporary photography worldwide for nearly two decades. And added to it are some of the most repeated treatments and subjects: deadpan portraits of the young, chill industrial landscapes, shaggy intimate documentation, detached urban commonplaces. Anybody who wandered into an art museum showing contemporary photographs in the last decade is likely to have seen -- and seen again -- works resembling these. They have been inescapable.

That situation has exhausted for me the capacity to respond to the young people shot in color by Celine van Balen, Bertien van Manen, Hellen van Meene or the star among them, Reineke Dijkstra. I know I'm supposed to find the portraits of prepubescent girls, especially, haunting and vulnerable. But the photographs simply are not strong enough as aesthetic objects to wipe away the impressions left by all

the epigones. The best I can do is read in the show and catalog the circumstances of the works' creation and try to picture how they looked in relation to other Dutch photographs of the period. It may seem an odd practice, having words declare importance where the images do not, but nowadays that's characteristic of some of the most highly praised contemporary art.

The pieces here that do have impact tend to be "about" the photographic medium or other fine art. Elspeth Diederix's banal subjects, for example, would hold no interest at all, were it not for the color she has artificially heightened for her camera. And Hans van der Meer's pictures of amateur soccer games might be mistaken for amateur sports photographs if it were not for their evocation of 17th Century Dutch paintings of skaters.

These, like the highly formal black-and-white sequence of the back of a man dying of AIDS by Koos Breukel and the empty spaces shot in black and white by Wijnanda Deroo, are stronger than others on view because they engage more strongly with the history of visual culture where considerations of too early or too late are subsumed by the timeless.

"In Sight: Contemporary Dutch Photography from the Collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam" will continue at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave. through May 8. 312-443-3600.

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