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Framed New World

By Joanna Pitman

A book's fresh survey of contemporary photographers suggests that life is all in the details, says Joanna Pitman. Helen Chadwick said that "photography is like the skin that I breathe through". For her and for many other artists of the 20th century, photography became the result of a compulsion to register experience, a desire to track down and record the bones and sinews of their civilisation as a means of knowing that they still lived in it.

It appears that photography in the 21st century is still fulfilling that function if we are to judge by a new book, *Blink*. It describes itself as "a snapshot of the world of contemporary photography...providing a global overview of the most exciting developments in photography today". In fact it's less a snapshot than a bulky and correspondingly heavy tome, like a huge exhibition displayed within hard covers, presenting selections from the work of 100 "up and coming" photographers chosen by ten curators from across the world.

In terms of subject-matter, *Blink* gives us an overview of the human condition at the start of this century. We have life and death, work and play, war and peace, youth and age as seen through multitudes of people and their spaces. These are portraits of those special intersections between the old uninhabited land and our modern, cluttered, cultivated world.

They are implacably detailed, highly wrought images, many of them minutely manipulated. A measure of their impact is the length of time one spends taking in their details, figuring out where they are from and where they are going.

Take Philip-Lorca DiCorcia's shot, *Stranger in Paradise*, for example. This shows a beautifully dressed and highly polished woman standing expectantly inside an apparently bare room. Through the glass sliding doors we see a swimming pool surrounded by decking and loungers, and a garden of neatly barbered hedges and manicured lawns. Two children have been invited to pose as if playing in the sun at the edge of the pool. A suave man in a suit approaches across the lawn.

The shot gives us the instant illusion of a wealthy American family that swims, sunbathes and drinks iced teas in grateful seclusion, biding the hours that stretch out in an endless vista from this particular fraction of a second.

Strangely, it seems to give you all you need at a single glance, but at the same time makes you want to know everything else and particularly to get the lowdown on this woman. Does she live here? Is the man her husband or her lover or, as the title suggests, a stranger? As you look closer, the shadows seem a bit suspect. Is the sliding door glass? Or is it one of those new architectural interior surfaces on which people project their favourite image as decoration?

Although a seemingly simple photograph, there is an entire world inside this cinematic frame, a workout for the eyes, minutely stage-directed and polished, which becomes a gripping subject for the psychologist and the sociologist.

Lorca is 51 years old and already well established as a major photographic talent. As such, he is hardly up and coming as the book's introduction claims. But one genuinely new and young talent, little known outside his native Spain, is Daniel Canogar, whose images of thousands of outstretched hands are hypnotically intense.

The mass of hands, old and young, big and small, seems to creep all over the frame like some huge and multiplying biological culture. Some are beseeching, some calming, perhaps offering benediction. Some are in repose, others squeezing, stretching and pulling.

Looking at it, one thinks of the complex fate of human beings in this world, pressed into a barrel like herrings, forced into cities with no air, no horizons and expected to survive in populous confusion.

Hybrids, genetically engineered mutants and modified bodies clearly loom large in the photographic consensus of the moment. Dieter Huber, a young Austrian whose work has been shown principally in Austria and Germany, gives us a series of gaudily manipulated plant forms, cacti twisted into perfect rings, branches sprouting green tubular nooses, a string of glistening green beans or petals seemingly strung together like a necklace.

The Brazilian Vik Muniz's work is equally about strange and wonderful possibilities. He presents a series of photographs of bodies changed into unexpected forms. He makes a "Medusa Marinara" from the spaghetti and sauce left on his plate, a pair of Mona Lisas from raspberry jam and peanut butter, a tableau of paparazzi outlined in liquid chocolate and photographed head on. "We have become so sophisticated in our visual habits," he says, "that we often overlook the magic behind representation...Sometimes I try to imagine the world before anyone had a camera."

Blink betrays the herd instinct displayed by some curators, who favour the fashionable cinematic faked reality genre above all else, and the occasional entry suffers from being mere novelty. But the book presents an interesting take on contemporary photography and exposes some radical visions. Many of them will be gone in the click of a shutter, but a few will doubtless endure.

* *Blink* is published by Phaidon