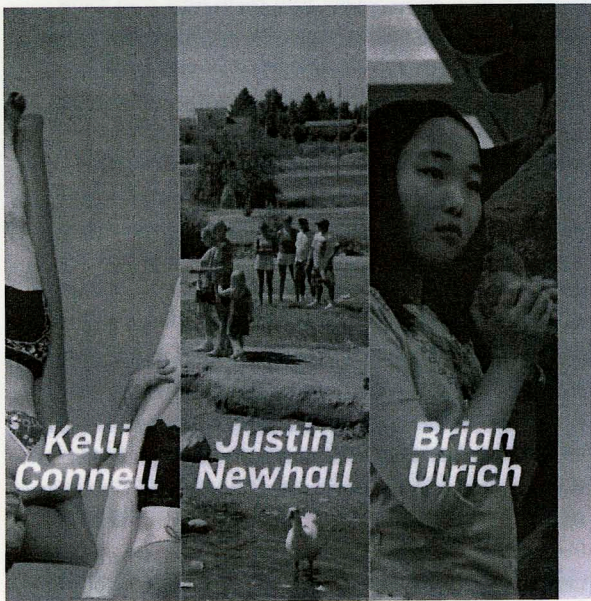


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MP3 CHICAGO-STYLE

MP3: MIDWEST PHOTOGRAPHERS PUBLICATION PROJECT
INDIVIDUAL TITLES BY KELLI CONNELL, JUSTIN NEWHALL, AND
BRIAN ULRICH
NEW YORK: APERTURE/MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY,
2006
56 PP./\$30.00 (HB WITH SLIPCASE)



The Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), originally known as the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography, was founded in the late seventies at Chicago's Columbia College as a student gallery that with time has become a vital venue for photography. The Midwest Photographers Project (MPP), founded at the museum in 1982, was then, and remains today, one of the most innovative programs at the museum, according to Curator Karen Irvine.¹ Covering nine Midwestern states,² the MPP is a collection of portfolios loaned by regional photographers for a two-year period. While a good deal of the collection emphasizes emerging artists, the mission is directed at new *work*, not necessarily new *artists*. In other words, the collection not only houses a wide array of emerging artists but new bodies of work by established artists, the likes of Barbara Crane, David Goldes, and Alec Soth. Located in the James J. Brennan Print Study Room, this collection is likely one of the most widely viewed in the United States. Occupying the top floor of the museum, the work is in portfolio cases on display shelves. The photographs are viewed by curators and scholars, a steady stream of Chicago school students, and the general public, and are even used as a resource toward sales for the individual artists, many of whom are at a stage in their careers in which, while their emerging talent is gaining national recognition, they are not represented by a gallery.

This October the MoCP put out what they hope to be an annual publication. *MP3: Midwest Photographers Publication Project*, released in

partnership with Aperture Foundation, is a boxed set of three books presenting the work of three emerging photographers currently in the archive: Kelli Connell, Justin Newhall, and Brian Ulrich. “The books are a little different from the Project itself,” comments Irvine. “The boxed set seeks to proactively put forth emerging artists.”³ Diversity is the key carry-forward from the mission of the Project, as the books represent three very divergent visions, from diverse locations in the Midwest, and three wholly different methodologies of imagemaking. In each book a 1,500-word essay by a different member of the museum’s staff alludes to the collaborative nature of the Project itself as a partnership between the artists—as lenders—and the MoCP. Connell’s book, *Double Life*, features an essay by Museum Director Rod Slemmons, Newhall’s *Historical Marker* includes an essay by Irvine, and Ulrich’s *Copia* contains an essay by Associate Director Natasha Egan.

The boxed set, with its Time-Life-style packaging and exceptional design, retails at \$30, further widening the potential audience these newcomers will enjoy with added circulation from the museum’s partnership with Aperture. However, cost-savings measures resulted in the print quality suffering, and color is often skewed. At least once the color between two halves of a photograph crossing the spread is inconsistent. It seems the desire to keep the retail price low has subverted three very talented new artists’ work. Particularly, because the role of color in each artist’s work is not only key, it is a pencil with which each artist draws their unique vision. This uncharacteristic underachievement in color matching (for Aperture/MoCP), is only one of two blemishes (the other being a few oversimplified picture relationships) in this otherwise brilliant set of books.

The first book in this handsome set is that of Connell, an artist from Ohio. Connell’s provocative imagery of two women, seemingly twins—in relational poses implying intimacies from conversation and argument to care-giving and sexuality—is in fact created using a single model and digital manipulation. At first, the works have an overt homosexual overtone, but, in viewing them with the creation methodology in mind, the use of one model becomes a neutralizing force. She becomes a palette on which Connell places notions of the iterations of intimacy between two people, any kind, any two. Slemmons states in his essay, “The moments [Connell] directs and records are, for the most part, highly charged, creative punctuations in the generally tedious flow of experience” (49).

Newhall’s *Historical Marker*, a documentary project tackling the Lewis and Clark Trail in a wholly novel way, is an essay of place and transition through the margins, people, and markers along the modern-day trail. Newhall is hypnotized by nostalgia, yet he finds enough distance to depict the irony of the growth of communities along the trail as a sort of forfeiture of ambition for facsimiles of engagement with this mythical West of lore. His is the nonverbal essence of manifest destiny—a graphic novel version of the pioneer poem “Home on the Range” by Dr. Brewster M. Higley (1871). These are not easy pictures; they tease out a sometimes harsh,

sometimes sweet, song about our desire for more, our fidgety stasis, and our detached attachment (both literally and figuratively) to history as Americans.

Comparing the three artists’ works, Ulrich’s *Copia* screams where Newhall’s and Connell’s images speak in softer tones. Working on an ongoing project concerned with consumerism in the U.S., Ulrich captures the repetitive and supple qualities of the American retail franchise. In viewing the pictures, which depict shoppers in well-lit, overstocked stores, one cannot help but to identify with the image in the mirror he brazenly sets before us.

Despite the shortcomings of *MP3*, the mission to draw the collective national photographic eye toward the Midwest and its new talent is clear. An exceptional side effect of this project is not only the connections it has made to the greater art community, but also the personal and professional connections it has fostered between these artists. Connell states, “I am honored to be sharing the publication with Justin and Brian. I admire their work and I think that we are all doing very different things, so this is a plus. I think all of us would agree that we are also hoping that this might lead to a larger (solo) monograph in the future.” And Newhall echoes, “Both Kelli and Brian are amazing artists ... I would buy either of their books on their own, and the fact that you get three for one is all the better.”

The strange thing is that none but Ulrich really tackle the landscape or landmarks of the Midwest itself, and even Ulrich’s work—while substantially located—represents the homogeneity of consumerism in the U.S. He states, “Much more is readily available in the Midwest in terms of locations to photograph. From here I can travel one hour in any direction and be in very different places that would appear nothing like an urban center.” But, in truth, though mostly situated in the suburban outer rings of Chicago, it seems that being outside an “urban center” could effectively be anywhere. This is not the point of *MPP*, or the book project; it is that new work, vital work, comes from the middle. It comes from the shared space between intimates, from a two-hundred-year-old road emanating from that middle land, and from its people mulling about in its glossy, coast-emulating, retail euphoria.

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NOTES 1. Interview with Karen Irvine, March 22, 2006. 2. These states include Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin. 3. All quotes from Kelli Connell, Justin Newhall, and Brian Ulrich are from e-mail correspondence with each artist: Connell on May 6, 2006; Newhall on May 25, 2006; and Ulrich on April 7, 2006.