

September 30, 2015–March 27, 2016



NEW ARRIVALS

# PHOTOGRAPHS

FROM THE O'NEIL COLLECTION



Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953). *Shalanta*. 2003. From the series *Class Pictures*. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Nancy and Tom O'Neil, Baltimore, BMA 2013.330

**N**ANCY AND TOM O'NEIL HAVE LIVED in Baltimore since 1982, collecting art all the while and focusing on the photography of our times since the late 1990s. In 2013, the O'Neils gave a group of 24 works by 19 artists to The Baltimore Museum of Art. Their gift has substantially grown the Museum's late 20th- and early 21st-century holdings, strengthening the array of photographic approaches and images of our world that the Museum can share with the Baltimore community, as well as its audiences of national, international, and virtual visitors. They followed their BMA gift with an equally significant donation of related works to the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, Tom O'Neil's alma mater, laying the groundwork for exciting future collaborations between the two institutions. Additionally, in 2014, the O'Neils established the O'Neil Family Contemporary Photography Fund to support the BMA's efforts in

programming, conservation, and acquisition initiatives around recent photography.

Beyond the gift's scale, the thoughtfulness with which it has been assembled and the highly relevant topics it addresses make it transformative for the BMA. The O'Neils have developed ongoing relationships with the artists they collect: both established, influential figures and emerging talents. Because of these friendships and their passion for research, the couple has been in a unique position to select pivotal images from overall bodies of work. They have also honed in on photography's extraordinary capacity to represent the human condition today, prioritizing two types of work: portraits that poignantly reveal individuals' struggles and achievements, and images that document and investigate the complex exchange between people and the environment. The emphasis on these themes allows their collection to shift dynamically between personal, microcosmic glimpses of contemporary life and more epically cast views of the ecological change caused by society's drive to fulfill its needs and desires.

The range of innocence to experience is captured through the portraits. Dawoud Bey's *Shalanta*, 2003, for instance, presents a confident high school student by pairing her exuberant image with her statement about future goals. Part of Bey's *Class Pictures* series, the piece foregrounds youthful determination and individuality over the inertia of an American culture that tends to constrain teens within demographic blocks. Similarly, the duo Anderson & Low use the device of a double portrait to provide a faceted look at American youth: in this case, the athletic prowess and elite military training of U.S. Naval Academy midshipman Christopher Dingman.

Bryan Schutmaat's *Ralph, Moorcroft, Wyoming*, 2011, provides a stirring contrast to the images of *Shalanta* and Dingman. Like an uncompromising Northern Renaissance portrait, the image contains exacting facial details—deep lines and graying hairs that reflect a life of labor in a dying Western mining town. The picture appears in this exhibition alongside another

of Schutmaat's images, which translates Ralph's weathered features to a gray landscape in Colorado and suggests the unresolved ways in which industry injects itself upon the majesty of the land.

More explosive interfaces between man and nature appear in Larry Schwarm's *Wheat Stubble Fire, Eastern Colorado*, 1992 (printed 2004), and Naoya Hatakeyama's *Blast 8326*, 1995. Schwarm's photograph documents a prairie fire, a manmade inferno intended to regenerate the diminishing grasses necessary for cattle ranching. Hatakeyama's image stills the destructive forces of limestone mining, a practice that pollutes the environment yet supports urban development. The repercussions of unchecked industrialization are perhaps most tragically demonstrated in Richard Misrach's *Holy Rosary Cemetery (Crucifix), Taft, Louisiana*, 1998, a bitter photographic elegy in which the gravestones of a local cemetery are echoed by the sinister lines of a chemical plant.

The artists included in the 2013 gift are truly international (as are the sites and subjects they depict), hailing from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. At the same time, the O'Neils' collection offers particularly provocative insights on the impact that consumer culture has had on the American landscape, feelings of national pride, and identity. A gleaming White Castle fast-food restaurant and hulking water tower are framed as awkward but iconic edifices in George Tice's black-and-white studies of Rahway, New Jersey. Brian Ulrich captures a serendipitous moment in which a chaotic splash of spilled milk energizes the monotonous, mercantile stasis of a "big box" grocery store. Commerce and grass-roots patriotism meet in Nathan Lyons's images of the American flag in the months after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The examples here are part of a larger sequence by Lyons that documents the proliferation of symbolic displays throughout the country, often utilizing spaces like billboards and shop windows where expressions of grief and resilience inextricably mix with the American entrepreneurial spirit.

Another way to reshuffle the O'Neil images is to set subject matter aside and consider their powerful visual qualities. Many of the compositions, like Chan Chao's *Buddhist Monk*, 1997, brim with the luminous, deftly considered color one would expect to experience in paintings. Others explore photography's technical potential to create novel experiences of time and

space. Long exposures produce the poetic blurs and layering in Matthew Pillsbury's and Abelardo Morell's contemplations of a New York City carousel and Havana public sculpture, respectively. Stefan Kirkeby and Thomas Kellner similarly provide surprising perspectives on familiar landmarks. The Lincoln Memorial twists and tumbles in Kellner's composite view, created by sequencing together a series of part-by-part shots of the monument. Kirkeby transforms a vast expanse of power lines into a graceful and delicate convergence of verticals, diagonals, and arcs.

Additional selections from the O'Neils' gift are on view elsewhere in the Museum, illuminating the depth and range of the couple's collection and showcasing the ways these photographs connect to a variety of works in the BMA's holdings. These include images to be discovered in the Contemporary Wing galleries during fall 2015 and spring 2016, as well as a remarkable trio of photographs by Edward Burtynsky, featured in *New Arrivals: Gifts of Art for a New Century*, on view from February 7 to May 8, 2016, in the Thalheimer galleries. Burtynsky shares with many of the other photographers represented in the O'Neils' collection an ability to find beauty even in the globe's most environmentally devastated sites; taken together, their work is a powerful inspiration for sustainable change.



Brian Ulrich (American, born 1971). *Kenosha, WI*. 2003. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Nancy and Tom O'Neil, Baltimore, BMA 2013.351. ©Brian Ulrich, courtesy Robert Koch Gallery



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