



Bill Jacobson: *Thought Series #2580*, 1998, gelatin silver print, 24 by 20 inches; at Julie Saul.

Bill Jacobson at Julie Saul

Eleven photographs were on view in this show: half a dozen are head shots, three are images of water, one shows a single hand and one a seated, naked body. All are titled *Thought Series*, and all are gelatin silver prints. The range of tones is narrow and the passage from light to shadow surpassingly subtle; there are none of the sun-struck, bleached whites that have appeared in Jacobson's previous prints, nor does he reach for velvety blacks. These photographs do retain the soft focus that has characterized his work to date, but their closest affinity is with paintings; Gerhard Richter's photo-based portraits of dead nurses and German terrorists in particular come to mind.

Much of the currently prevalent shot-from-the-hip photography, obliquely framed, loosely focused and indifferently exposed, is meant to deemphasize its makers' technical

mastery, affecting a kind of visual slouch. There is nothing of the slacker about Jacobson's recent work. Instead, it seems literally polished, buffed to a dull sheen that is painterly in the tradition of Academic canvases' licked finishes. If less animated than some contemporary photography, it is more intent.

There is, indeed, a hint of the heroic in the gaunt, Gallic, vaguely Duchampian profile shown in one photograph, and an innocent earnestness in the straight-on portrait of a youthful man. One alert young sitter gazes thoughtfully, if a little staggily, to his left;

another eyeballs the viewer with a resolute, mournful stare. All the images are tightly cropped, in one case so radically that only chin and mouth make the cut. In the water shots, tight framing results in limited expanses of rippled sea that are without shoreline or horizon. Again, a painter comes to mind, Vija Celmins, whose images of water and sky seem close in spirit to the preternaturally still, almost stony (as in polished granite) surfaces that Jacobson attains. The vertical orientation of his water images further weakens the connection with natural bodies of water and their earthbound, lateral flow.

These mute seascapes are the first of Jacobson's photographs to depart from the human subject. But they were interspersed with the other photographs here in a carefully paced, linear sequence that reintroduced a measure of the narrative complexity that marked some of Jacobson's previous work. Though figure groups and social situations are dispensed with, the relationships between individual moments in this series—the passage from meditative face to watery deep to the lone dangling arms—are richly theatrical.

—Nancy Princenthal

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