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Allan McCollum. Perpetual Photos. 1982/89. Gelatin prints, unique.

Allan McCollum's
**PERPETUAL
PHOTOS**

Joseph Masheck

Allan McCollum has been known for several years for his “surrogate paintings,” small, blank, solid stand-ins for framed images, often presented in ensemble hangings. These are in a sense images of the condition of images, less like “jokers” that can mean anything than the cards treating game rules that come with the decks without being part of them. Recently McCollum has shown photographs of a kind that also “image” the condition of images, whether paintings, photographs, or art reproductions to begin with. These are definitively photographic, where the “generic” paintings are special, empty cases of painting. The new works are blown up details of pictures occurring as props in old movies as shot from a television screen. So a minimum of four layers obtains, more if the prop was a reproduction to begin with.



*Allan McCollum. Perpetual Photo (#4.)
1984. Gelatin print, unique.*

The photographs have the precision of scientific or “intelligence” inquiry, with vagueness connoting an absolute limit of investigability. If the generic paintings hold up the image of blankness, the photographs display a residuum of representation as almost material in character, something with a basic molecular density. Right where intelligibility decays, the qualitative feel of what is left, its somethingness, has a textuality that is anything but conceptual. Hitting acknowledgeable bottom this way holds in suspension a longing for more, an immanence out of reach (perhaps a photographic opposite and counterpart to recent paintings by Ross Bleckner in which a luminous source is forever retreating). The photographs offer something that is really there, but you can never quite have it; as such, this is the opposite of pornography, where you can have it but only in rigor mortis.

Generally photograph’s prose (or metonymic) commitment shows up painting’s poetic (or metaphoric) capacity. But if McCollum’s vacant paintings, sculpturesquely physical, some painted plaster, make for a wittily, clunky, fools-gold version of painting, his original photographs of video copies of cinematographic images of pictures on some wall offer a poetic of distancing. Confronting the base metal of a fallen world in which darkness would comprehend light can encourage consciousness instead of delusion or escape. Instead of retailing vagueness as such, perhaps hinting at a gnostic secrecy, McCollum’s new photographic works in elegant black, this-worldly frames, offer in their own right polished slices of pure appearance.