

Wall Street International

ART

Alex Nichols

The Space Between



I first saw Nichols work in 2004 at the London home of a collector friend. I was moved by the fluidity with which form was expressed. This was clearly the work of a master draftsman. In these earlier works, whether abstractions of poppies or nude figures, one detected echoes of Matisse's line drawings and whispers of Far Eastern calligraphy, both of which I later learn, were early influences on this 38 year old artist who is a native of San Francisco.

Her current show at Modernism West (Nichol's first show with this gallery was in 2010) is evidence of how far Nichols has travelled as an artist from her classical beginnings. This new work also draws on her experience of Japan, where she has worked periodically over the past years, yet now her influences are Bruce Nauman, Pina Bausch, Shuji Terayama, Yoko Ono and Ekoe Hosoe. In *The Space Between*, an extraordinary visual essay on the dynamic of interpersonal relationships, Nichols has achieved a new and unique voice.

In a white room two people dressed in black are photographed. One can tell from their size and shape that the sitters change from one image to the next, but their individuality seems irrelevant. What is being photographed here is the language of relationships "I'm not looking at body language" Nichols tells me, "I'm looking at space; the space that links us; the space that links language. Space is everything. How else do we know when a word begins or ends? In the silence of language, in the space of language, everything is communicated. So I want to stop and take a close look. I want to stand alone in a room with another person and document our personal language and I want to learn to read this language because in that connection is me and in that connection is you".

Nichols photographs document a series of experiments in which participants are asked to interact with an object and each other, without touching and without a witness, other than the camera. Nichols then selects the resulting images and arranges them in a series of sizes and positions so that the viewer begins to draw connections and disconnections between them. Arranged on a 49 foot long wall, in sizes from 4 to 43 inches, the photographs in the "the space between" become an installation to be "read" by the viewer as a whole. The bodies become like characters on a page, and a language, highly personal yet deeply universal, begins to emerge. Issues of identity, interpersonal relationships, and unspoken, unspeakable communications are read from the volume around the participants as they move, sometimes playfully, others times solemnly, through the series of photographs.

In some pieces there is a tension in the space between the figures. In others there is drama, magic, comedy even. One senses that each seemingly discontinuous pairing is perhaps representative of the artist's own struggle to stretch, morph, juggle, balance and re-define her relationships.

In the Wim Wenders film, *Pina*, about the dancer and choreographer Pina Bausch, a woman in a white dress is seen running. She is in an austere concrete-clad room; a rope tied around her waist, when she reaches the end of the rope she is snapped violently back, her body jolts and collapses. Nichols tells me that as she watches the dancer run and snap she recognizes herself. "My physicality, my need to keep moving as a way of comprehending the world around meant that using my body to express the ideas and vision was a perfect match. So I began to have a dialogue with myself using my body- placing it in boxes, hanging from walls and dropping, I put my ideas through physical process. and then literally I came to a hall and at the other end of the hall stood a person and I suddenly recognized that it was not the body alone but the body in relation to another body that could express my deepest interest which was how we connect how we relate and how we communicate."

Her projects are initiated from a deeply personal space. Nichols wants her art to have "a punctum", as she calls it, "a lasting prick or wound on the skin" in recognition that in the space between others and us lies a primary language stripped from distraction. A space that reveals the self. She wants the viewer to learn to read our own space and how we navigate it. Her work begins, she says, with the question, "Who am I? From there I understood that who I am is in context to other. That it is only through others that we see ourselves. So it begins from me but has an inherently political aspect to it because it exists in the context of " I am a woman". It is a woman (not a man) asking how she exists in the world and this is not a neutral position, even if I wanted it to be neutral".

In her ongoing quest to channel new forms of artistic expression, Nichols recently completed MFA in writing and poetry from California Collage of the Arts and every 6 months she travels to Tokyo to work in her studio there, citing as important influences such Japanese poets as Aida Mitsuo and Yoko Tawada. In 2011 Nichols spent a year trawling through discarded items of refuse at the San Francisco Dump, to construct works which re-established intention through form. For more than eight years she has also studied Chinese Calligraphy, which eventually lead her to this project at Modernism West into which the contemplative beauty of the calligrapher's craft is clearly channeled. She seems drawn to situations, which are uncomfortable because they force her to start from nothing, to look, become alert again and to see, as though for the first time. Nichols says she does not know what her next project is going to be, but as she puts it "I need to keep putting myself out there in new and different ways given a chance to recalibrate and reorient".

Alex Nichols' *The Space Between* is showing at Modernism West in San Francisco till 17th October 2015.

All the images are by Alex Nichols



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