

lower\_cavity

CHAMBER: Juliana Halpert

*Dominus Tuus*

07.22.2023 - 09.11.2023

(On view by appointment only)

Juliana Halpert is always asking what a photo holds—what is contained not simply within a particular image, but within the larger set of actions that constitute photography as a site of cultural production. For Halpert, a photograph is always evidence—not in the usual sense of documenting a specific place or event or thing—but rather of *itself*: of the acted-upon desire to record something through the network of social and technologic mechanisms we refer to as “photography.” Because of this, Halpert’s work is not solely occupied with the visual—she seems as much concerned with what is captured by the act of taking a photograph, and the circumstances informing that act, as with what is depicted in it.

If this aspect of Halpert’s practice can be regarded as an ongoing exploration of the larger implications of the photographic impulse, then her project for Chamber feels like an intimate consideration of how that impulse has evolved for her personally since her early days as an image maker. The images installed in Chamber’s interconnected subterranean rooms are, for the most part, photos that Halpert took over a decade ago, and which she has not seen since then until printing them in the darkroom earlier this year. From her perusal of thousands of these forgotten negatives, Halpert has extracted just nine images.

The sense of this collection of pictures as a site of personal inquiry—of the presence of a restless, self-inquisitive eye and hand actively at work—manifests in multiple ways throughout the installation. The images are hand-taped to sections of matboard that have been covered in faded newsprint and lightly dusted with muted pastel pigment; in some cases, they are backed with old plates from art history monographs. Halpert has affixed these ephemeral constructions directly to the walls with uneven strips of masking tape, giving them a provisional feel that heightens the impression of someone engaged in a private activity. Deployed in spare arrangements through the three tiny but high-vaulted rooms that comprise Chamber—spaces that evoke the contemplative austerity of a monk’s cell—these assemblages feel more like found objects, something one could imagine discovering at the bottom of a box at a yard sale or flea market.

At a casual glance, the images themselves might be regarded as lacking the formal or technical qualities traditionally associated with “good” photographs. A collection of hands beating a drum; friends posing in front of a castle; a close-up of a hard-boiled egg with the phrase “Hard-boiled Egg” handwritten across its surface—together, the everyday subject

matter and plainspoken compositions evoke the kind of images one takes when one is young and learning how to make a photograph—when one’s artistic aspirations are nascent and not yet broadened (or sullied) by knowledge of established histories and sophisticated techniques.

Yet the unstudied quality of the images, at once earnest and aspirational, acquires a spectral charge here, one that underscores the unreliability and open-ended nature of any photographic image, and of the larger project of photography itself. As one navigates the seductive and enigmatic space of Halpert’s installation, it’s easy to forget the hand of her present-day self at work behind the scenes, directing the selection and seemingly impromptu arrangement of these long-unseen photographs.

There is a slipperiness here, an elasticity to the implied authorial voice of this project, and to its presumed subject, which is perhaps Halpert’s true area of inquiry. In the images she has selected, there are multiple references to the processes of photography—a picture of a grid of polaroid test prints arranged on a table, an exposure test of a leopard, two separate exposures of a photo of her parents. They’re reminders that Halpert—an artist whose work, despite its deceptively straightforward visual sensibility, should never be taken at face value—is not putting these images under our consideration for their intrinsic qualities, but as a kind of speculative investigation, a means of measuring the distance traveled between different iterations of herself. The years-long lacunae that stretches between the moment these images were taken and her present-day self’s exhumation of them becomes the lens through which this distance comes into view. The project reverberates with the many irreconcilabilities of image-making, memory, and the narratives of selfhood—it is a kind of auto-haunting, in which both present and past selves seek traces of the other through images, each hoping to uncover evidence of who they once were, and who they imagined they might come to be.

—*Anthony Discenza*

Checklist:



*Hard-boiled egg*

2010/2023.

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, tape, string.



*Hands and drum*

unknown/2023

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, tape, pastel.



*Self-portrait*

2011/2023

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, tape, black-and-white plates from *Giuseppe Geurreschi* by Giorgio Kaiserlian (Milan: Edizioni Centro Culturale San Fedele, 1959).



*Polaroids*

2008/2023

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, cardboard, tape.



*Mom and Dad I*

unknown/2023

Silver gelatin print.



*Mom and Dad II*

unknown/2023

Silver gelatin print.



*Graham, Zach, Reese, Kristen, Isaac, Liz, and Valerie at Château de Chenonceau,*  
2008/2023

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, tape, pastel.



*Cheetah*  
2010/2023

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, tape, fiberboard.



*Founder's Day*  
2011/2023

Silver gelatin print, newsprint, matboard, tape, pastel, black-and-white plates from *Giuseppe Geureschi* by Giorgio Kaiserlian (Milan: Edizioni Centro Culturale San Fedele, 1959)