

Theta

Christopher Baliwas

Skin 2 skin

March 8 - April 20, 2024

The title *Skin 2 skin* intimates how these remarkable works came to be made: brought into the world via touch and transferral. Christopher Baliwas travels this way, by contact. Impressions adhere, every object seems to be going somewhere; states blur into situations. There are no metaphors in sight.

An off-the-grid exploration between photography and DJing grounds these works. It is as if the fundamentals of photography - to make a record! - have become unmoored from specific technologies and now live across person, camera, printer, tape, plexi, media file. Baliwas strips image-making down to various essences then rebuilds it in a sticky space where physical processes bridge ideas.

The use of packaging tape as both sculptural material and camera apparatus (a way to lift an image) stretches back to the decade he spent working as shipping manager for different companies, including vinyl digger meccas Turntable Lab (NYC) and STOKYO (LA). Labor into image and vice-versa; tape's material history loops inside the artist's.

Baliwas calls these works "pull prints" because the multistage process involves, among other things, a painstakingly slow peelback of tape which has been applied to the front of an archival inkjet print. The prints contain imagery lifted from the artist's most beloved records, reduced to signs buried within the adhesive brown landscapes as positive and negative transfers. The resultant collages—some nearly monochrome from afar—are composed from remains, though they solidify a desire to remain. Indexical, yes, but the same year Rosalind Krauss inked that concept into art history, Kraftwerk released their third ode to frictionless travel, "Trans Europe Express," which promptly got sampled into early rap then everywhere else, including the piece here titled '50999 6 99588 1 6', where the iconic cover art makes a fragmentary appearance.¹

Indexical artworks arise "as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples."² But I'm also thinking about how DJs used to scratch identifying labels off their best records so the competition couldn't swipe their tunes: *Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get*.³

Several of the images have been rephotographed using long, low-light exposures as a way to digitally mimic the analog photogram process. Sometimes the source photo is taped on plexiglass, verso side facing the lens, which looks *through* the image to capture the photo's front and back in the same extended moment. This work surfaces the underground.

You can see it in 'Andrew Cyrille at the Village Vanguard, 2013.' Focused ghostly inside in his drum kit, the invisible man appears to recede into the photo paper, which itself takes on the texture of a wall. It's a richly sonic composition, less for what it portrays than by how it manifests. "The sonorous... outweighs form," wrote Jean-Luc Nancy in *Listening*. "The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence."⁴

The material fact of 'Cyrille' constitutes a wholeness which my read separates (person, paper, wall, image, document of a concert, datum) so I'll unsplit the difference and focus on how easily slippage from person to image to object can happen. Every underdog knows this. Cow, goat, fish. Camel, rabbit, Kevlar. Drum skins are made from all these things but nowadays they are mostly made of plastic.

1 Kraftwerk's techno pop travel ballads (vs refugee time) are discussed in Chapter 9 of Jace Clayton's *Uproot: Travels in 1st-Ct Music and Digital Culture*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2016.

2 Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America Part 2." October. 1977.

3 The Dramatics, "Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get." Stax Records, 1971. "Some people are made of plastic.."

4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. Page 2. Fordham University Press. 2006.

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All the works in *Skin 2 skin* expose the hands-on effort of their own making—all except one, 'Cover:'. The photo shows the artist's family at a petting zoo: pregnant belly, human kid and goat kid united by a gentle crop. A different type of labor and lineage enters the picture, sure as their faces lie safely outside it. The tenderness evokes a mood of viewing with which we might approach everything here, including each other.

Skin 2 skin gifts us ur-images that remix the roots of photography. I view Baliwas' varied methodology as being in line with hip-hop's voracious attitude towards legacy wherein the tiniest samples can be sped up or slowed down or chopped together to transform static records back into sounds for now. The South Bronx rewires Düsseldorf synths. A roll of tape replaces a roll of film. The camera, reconsidered, runs not on subject-captures-object distance but rather focuses on what comes together after contact, under pressure, as the tape pulls stuff off.

- Jace Clayton

Christopher Baliwas (b. 1987 Bay Area, CA) lives and works in Los Angeles. Baliwas received his MFA from Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. Group exhibitions include *Human Resources*, Los Angeles (2023); *Theta*, New York (2023); *UBS Gallery*, New York (2021); and *Malaspina Printmakers*, Vancouver (2022). This is his first solo exhibition with Theta and in New York.