

Pretty Vacant

Photographic fiction and fact **BY R.C. BAKER**

Within a block of each other on the Lower East Side, two photographers who dig into genres we thought we already knew — Heather Bennett uses self-portraiture to don various personas, Katherine Newbegin takes long exposures of empty interiors — manage to uncover fresh faces and new spaces.

Just how tough is that babe in the leather jacket, auburn bouffant, and model's cheekbones? She looks to have been around a bit, as has the 1969 Mercury Cougar she's just parked at the drive-in snack shack, its textured black hardtop dulled by too many Midwestern winters. And there she is again, wearing leopard print, but in this second story her hair trails softly off her shoulders and she is sipping a martini by a backyard pool. In the second scenario, Heather Bennett and a girlfriend, who is taking a cheek-collapsing drag on a cigarette, both look tense, their heavy eye makeup not fully camouflaging that they've rounded the corner of thirtysomething. Perhaps, in our youth-obsessed culture, they're pondering their future as cougars, the water-spotted and chipped martini glass symbolic of beauty's mortality.

Bennett gives the male gaze a workout; in previous pictures she has assumed the role of high-end model in her knockoffs of fashion ads, in one instance flashing shapely gams in a faux Calvin Klein underwear campaign. By playing stereotypes in these cultural readymades, Bennett exposed the ludicrous fantasies foisted upon female consumers: Wear these heels and this perfume and Brad Pitt awaits. Unlike Richard Prince, who simply cropped existing layouts to reveal the robotically similar expressions on different models, Bennett shifts our focus off the sales pitch and directly onto herself, artist as interloper in the field of dreams. And where Cindy Sherman nails cinematic archetypes — the ingénue, the sexpot — you just might meet the gals in Bennett's exhibition, "Four Stories," in your own life, not on the silver screen. Bennett's questing women, no matter their class or locale, are the end-users of the fantasies and clichés peddled by the beauty-industrial complex. Her formal finesse — note the liveness of the negative spaces between her figures — extends even to the brown wooden frames she has chosen for some pictures, which add to the timeless vibe of her imagery, part rec-room nostalgia, part insightful modernism.

In the two other miniseries here, Bennett's characters seem detached, almost disdainful, as if watching themselves surveying a cross-section of male desire. You can almost hear her alter egos — one wear-



Courtesy Heather Bennett



Courtesy Katherine Newbegin

Top: two from Bennett's "Four Stories." Bottom: Newbegin's shots from Poland and India

ing an evening dress to complement her tuxedoed date, the other rendezvousing with a tattooed tough — wondering (to the accompaniment of Peggy Lee's plaintive melody), "Is that all there is?"

Heather Bennett: 'Four Stories'

Stephan Stoyanov Gallery
29 Orchard Street
212-343-4240, stephanstoyanov.com
Through April 27

Katherine Newbegin: 'Vacant'

Lesley Heller Workspace
54 Orchard Street
212-410-6120, lesleyheller.com
Through April 20

pear unless they were to sit still in one spot."

Indeed, a sense of ghostly presence pervades Newbegin's shots of well-used interiors at various spots around the world: a bungalow in Germany, empty save for a heap of rags in one corner; a hotel bathroom in Serbia, missing some of its bold blue-and-white tiles. Newbegin shoots old-school Kodak negatives with a medium-format camera, and makes her prints on photographic paper in the darkroom. Nowadays we spend so much time gazing at artificially bright, oversaturated jpegs on computer screens that we can forget the material heft of actual photographs, a physicality that gives Newbegin's pictures a remarkable painterly quality. "I chose to photograph the space exactly as it appears — I do not move or change things," Newbegin notes in her e-mail. Instead, she frames her compositions with exceptional care, so the angles of a wall in a Cambodian guesthouse intersect abstractly with the strands of a beaded curtain and screened louvers, the light as palpable as the brushstrokes in a Renaissance canvas. Like the old masters, Newbegin conjures a sense of passing time coalescing into physical presence.

Newbegin's interiors don't feel so much



Courtesy Heather Bennett

Courtesy Katherine Newbegin

deserted as transitory, filled with life in the past and waiting to be again another day. This is very different from, say, Robert Polidori's dramatic photographs of an abandoned nuclear plant — Newbegin's spaces are the worse for wear, but inviting enough to be inhabited once more. In the gorgeous *Kailash Cinema (Kolkata, India)* (2010), Newbegin's 10-minute exposure captures a rapturous primary medley — rows of blue seats and red-and-yellow striped walls are washed in what appears to be daylight from an open lobby door; the glow drifts down the aisle and settles onto the wooden screen, the long shutter time transmuting it into a shimmering white blur.

This is one of the grand dramas of existence, 24-7-365 — that patient, shifting, ineffable play of light upon form, which, like the sounds of trees falling in forests, happens whether humans are aware of it or not. We're fortunate that Newbegin has been paying such close attention.