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A window on weird: step inside the Unseen Photo fair in Amsterdam

A former gas works housed a strange selection of undiscovered images, from sexy Chinese art censored by the authorities to a reworked West Side Story



Steven Kasher - fair booth, Unseen Photo fair, Amsterdam

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Housed in a disused gas works in Amsterdam, the Unseen Photo fair is the hip younger sibling of Paris Photo. Now in its second year, it comprised two big buildings full of galleries touting their wares, plus a book market showing the state of independent publishing and the growth of what the catalogue calls "beautiful books and their creators". There was also a Living Room chill-out

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zone, where photographers and the public mixed, watched films and took in talks as well as various "pavilions" – the Bright Young Things' Pavilion and the Foam Magazine Pavilion. And there were bars, after-hours' parties and a stall selling the ubiquitous frites with mayonnaise.

The Unseen idea – "to focus on undiscovered photography talent and unseen work by established photographers" – was stretched to the limit here, and there was much familiar work on show. But I was immediately taken with an installation at the Steven Kasher Gallery stand, in which artists Martin Hyers and William Mebane paid homage to Uranian Phalanastery. (No, me neither.)

An art collective founded on New York's Lower East Side in 1974, it was a mystical and esoteric venture. Its gurus saw Uranian Phalanastery as a mind-expanding pursuit that would challenge the constrictions of creativity, art and life itself, while altering the collective consciousness of America. I was guided through the site-specific installation – five mural-size prints that evoked the Uranian Phalanastery interior in all its jumbled strangeness – by a current devotee called One-Sun. It was half an hour well spent in a time capsule with walls that recreated the 1970s building and were overlaid with related ephemera: copies of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, outsider paintings, pamphlets, flyers – some of which featured visiting artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine – and risqué pin-ups. A strange and intriguing installation that stood out from the ordered commercialism of the fair.

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Edgy and often erotic ... Kiss by No 223, whose work is continually censored in China. Photograph: No 223 courtesy Stieglitz19

I was taken by the work of Lin Zhipeng, a Chinese photographer who goes under the name No 223, and whose edgy, often erotic work is continually censored by the authorities. Todd Hido's eerie night photographs of rural America looked even better than they do in his excellent books and seemed to unconsciously echo the work of Astrid Kruse Jensen, which is even more dreamlike and atmospheric. I also enjoyed Ashkan Honarvar's odd photocollages, in which the nude female body is reconfigured and adorned with fruit, leaves, butterflies, porcelain and fabric. It was interesting to see a large grid of Cristina de Middel's prints from her recent book with Self Publish Be Happy, which reworks West Side Story in a series of staged street tableaux. On a wall, they carried a weight I had not sensed before and seemed like a unified work.

Over at the book market, Self Publish Be Happy were doing brisk business with their new publication, Lorenzo Vitturi's limited-edition book Dalston Anatomy, which merges brash documentary, makeshift sculpture and collage in its evocation of the energy of London's Ridley Road Market. My eye was drawn to a quieter corner where one Jim Reed, a native of Tennessee, was selling his one-off artists' books which merge text and found photographs beautifully. Each one is handmade and ornately put together, then sold in an edition of one through his Easter Trouble Press. This is the ultimate example of the artist's book as art object and you can feel the love that he has put into each object. Next to him, a young photographer who uses analog, Lena

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Grass, had her first book, *Nachtigall* (Nightengale) on display. Darkly beautiful and nocturnal, it suggests a state of mind as much as any linear narrative. Well worth seeking out. As is *Tranquility*, which won the Unseen Dummy Book award. Comprising images of a place in California called Tranquility, it was described by one of the judges, Jorg Colberg as a "quiet, subtle and very well done book that needs a little time. It's really an experience. The book draws you in and creates atmosphere."



Eerie night shots ... Todd Hido's series showing rural America under the cover of darkness. Photograph: Todd Hido

A final word for an arresting group show called *Unnatural Selection*, curated by the photography writer and dealer Brad Feuerhelm, using images from his extensive archive of very strange photographs. Wilfully makeshift, the exhibition featured responses from nine women artists, including De Middel, Melinda Gibson, Eva Stenram and Tereza Zelenkova. It was consistently odd and challenging and worth a long, patient look. It would be great to see it restaged over here.

- This article was amended on 7 October 2013 to correct the spelling of Jim Reed's name, from Jim Reid.