Miriam Böhm, *Inventory III*, 2010, color photograph, 31 ½ x 23 ⅝".

Miriam Böhm, *Inventory I*, 2010, color photograph, 31 ½ x 23 ⅝".

Miriam Böhm

BRENDAN FAY

RECOGNITION AND ORIENTATION are the central concerns of Miriam Böhm's production: What do we look at, and from where? Over the past decade, following studies in Vienna and Amsterdam, the Berlin-based artist has made pictures that work with and upon the constructed nature of photographic representation. Recently, in the series "Archive," 2008; "Areal" and "Unfinished," both 2009; and "Inventory," 2010, Böhm has emphasized recursive and recombinatory methods, photographing physical arrangements of mounted photographs to produce compact groupings of interrelated images. Each set incorporates slightly different source material, including historical memorabilia, handmade renderings of marble textures, and landscape photographs taken by the artist; and each set follows slightly different parameters, as Böhm varies the physical characteristics of the mounts, their arrangement in space, and

the number of rephotographic stages. But these operations always take place within the shallow depth of a makeshift staging area, closed off at its rear by a vertical surface covered in grass cloth, jute, or a comparable material that similarly echoes the recent but receding past.

The consistency and rigor of Böhm's approach, however, push shifting resonances between source material and formal treatment to the fore. In the process, questions of subject and viewpoint undergo subtle inflections toward their material, spatial, or historical dimensions. Each photograph in "Unfinished," for example, contains a pair of frontally arranged close-ups of a faux marble surface in different states of completion. Their order isn't always clear, though, nor does it correlate with the occasional appearance in these images of a hand and brush. At times, as in *Unfinished III*, the painting in progress and the studio setting appear to be crafted from the same palette. In the series "Areal," photographs of trees maturing in a nursery, with their intervals between clear trunks and zones of cast shadow, seem to provide the figure for Böhm's complex operations upon them. The emphasis is on cuts and edges, deep spaces and narrow frames, views of and views through, a maddening catalogue of parallax *in potentia*. The progressive lightening of the background with successive iterations provides one of the clearest points of reference for our (procedural) distance from the source images.

This connection between recursion and gradation finds its strongest expression in the series "Archive." The works are color renderings of black-and-white photographs (of photographs, of photographs) that intensify our attention to warm and cool grayscale variations precisely as they drain the color from illustrations of national flags. The German flag appears frequently among these paper representations—originally vintage cigarette cards, objects of accumulation long in advance of their multiplication here—but there's no clear sense of how to read its prominence, particularly since the exact identity of the surrounding flags is frequently in doubt. If these mementos gesture toward nationalism, they do so in the same way that Böhm's background fabrics gesture toward the passage of time more generally: They point to things we think we see in hindsight, while refusing to clarify our viewing distance.

The repeated surprise of Böhm's work lies in the heavy pressure she places on the gap between object documentation and image reproduction, the way she places photographs, quite literally, between those modes of recording. The behind-the-scenes quality of these works suggests a passing connection to Louise Lawler's photographs, with more substantive links to her practice arising by way of a series of detours. Böhm's settings and arrangements are fabrications; if they evoke institutional or domestic spaces, they do so within a strategy of studio construction comparable in some ways to that of Thomas Demand (for

From top: **Miriam Böhm**, *Unfinished IV*, **2009**, color photograph, 17 ¾ x 25 ½". **Miriam Böhm**, *Archive III*, **2008**, color photograph, 20 x 31".

whom she worked for several years). Unlike Lawler's mise-en-scènes or the sets photographed by Demand, though, the raw material at the center of Böhm's operation isn't drawn from the art world or from popular media. When Böhm installs a rephotographic strategy within a constructive one, she largely separates iteration from appropriation. Rephotography, here, seems to be less about claiming or repurposing an extant relationship than about building one from scratch.

To deal in printed images at all, as artists and critics have increasingly noted, is becoming a programmatic rather than a normative position in the digital era. Böhm's particular approach to rephotographic technique foregrounds printing as a procedural and conceptual element of her work, placing the physicality of photographs *inside* their construction as images. But the role of printing within these images can also direct attention outward—in a move that might be seen alongside Lawler's shifting presentation strategies or the installations of Liz Deschenes—to the spaces where the encounter with the printed photograph still takes place.

In her latest series, "Inventory," Böhm has pared her method down to a single recursive operation. In each work, one mounted photograph appears before the camera, leaning against a coarse textile backdrop. The mounted photographs depict rectilinear packages wrapped in kraft paper or bubble wrap or tissue—art objects?—and manufactured cardboard boxes of similar proportions. These items lean against the same backdrop in the same manner that

Miriam Böhm, *Areal III*, 2009, color photograph, 19 ½ x 29 ½".

Miriam Böhm, *Inventory XIX*, **2010**, color photograph, 17¾ x 23⅝".

Miriam Böhm, *Inventory XVII*, **2010**, color photograph, 17¾ x 23⅝".

Miriam Böhm, *Inventory XV*, **2010**, color photograph, 17¾ x 23⅝".

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the photographs of them do, reappearing in different combinations with subtle variations in their arrangement or alignment. Occasionally, an additional element appears in the form of an underlay that separates the arrangements—again, in both iterations—from the floor.

Böhm's strategy in these works is to lay bare her operations and leave us to realize how little that serves to clarify our experience, which remains structured by a core perceptual dislocation: The objects in "Inventory" simply don't *look* twice foreshortened. They just look like they've been photographed from an oblique angle. This is, strictly speaking, a misperception, but we only ever see these objects recursively, with no measure of their original proportions. By what standard could we measure their slight deformations—except, potentially, for the pictures on the wall in front of us? What the mute surfaces of these wrapped items introduce as a thematic concern (the work of art in its object state, as *inventory* prepared for transit or storage) thus returns as a perceptual one: In Böhm's hands, it is the photograph's presence as an object that provides the most immediate basis for apprehending the image it contains.

Even this proves to be shaky ground. Scale is constantly in question in "Inventory," subjected to oscillating cycles of miniaturization and enlargement. Böhm's mounted photographs, for example, take in a larger field of view than the photographs

that contain them. She prints the first images slightly smaller than life-size, but then brings the camera closer so that they fill a greater portion of the final photographs. (The scaling factors, if you're up for counting warps and wefts, seem to be slightly different in each case.) The resulting works, in turn, are printed larger than life-size—yet here, as well, with calculated variations: Although all the photographs that make up "Inventory" share identical proportions, each is printed in one of three fixed sizes. If the confusions of Böhm's imagery throw us back on physical presence for reference, what we find there is not a set standard but a sliding scale. Between the variable scaling within each image and the variable sizing across the series, the end result is a bewildering constellation of relationships among the various props as they recur from one work to the next. A bubble-wrapped item grows dramatically between *Inventory III* and the identically sized *Inventory I*, while its paper-wrapped companion in *Inventory I* more or less holds its ground in the shift to the much smaller *Inventory XIII*.

This network of shifting scale relationships drives the series, throwing the emphasis onto the relationships between pictures. When installing her works, Böhm arranges the images in pairs and triptychs, stitching them into an extended dialogue, a network of overlapping echoes and folds, that incorporates the portrait and landscape formats and alternating left-right orientations of the works as well. Typical of Böhm's practice, this dialogue includes moments of particular irritation—like that bubble-wrapped prop in *Inventory I*, which somehow reappears the wrong way around, a mirror image of itself, in *Inventory III*. As it turns out, the left-right rhythms of the series result from a subtle manipulation: Every work where the objects face the left edge of the frame, like *Inventory III*, has been reversed before printing. Compared with the complex procedures

underlying "Archive" and "Areal," this seems relatively straightforward. To convince oneself of its systematic nature, however, requires close acquaintance with both the enigmatic packages and their surroundings. In this way, one comes to recognize little details that function like birthmarks and scars on individual objects; but one also gets to know particular knots in the floorboards and the texture of the backing fabric (with a pronounced grain on the bias, always aligned between inner and outer image but reversing direction from work to work). Several modes of looking appear to be in play: some allied with art handlers and museum photographers, perhaps, but others with the different gazes a portrait might receive from intimates and collectors over its material lifetime. Neither subject nor setting claims absolute priority.

The internal repetitions of Böhm's work, in the way they distribute attention within and across photographs, seem specifically to reject any notion of an infinite regress. Her rephotographic strategy gestures not toward an endless chain of images but toward our potential connection to the ones physically before us. There are echoes here of the shifting reception of Lawler's work, which has struck a different balance between critique and affect over the past decade, and of Matthew S. Witkovsky's recent meditation in these pages on the ways desire inflects our experience of photographic images in relation to photographic materiality. Böhm doesn't take for granted either our investment in or our distance from her source material, and she crafts an analogous position, a physical and affective middle ground, for the printed photograph itself. She holds open—and thereby intertwines—questions of whether and how we continue to engage printed images, and what we engage through them. □

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