

Art in Review

Josephine Pryde

Maids & Magnetism

Reena Spaulings Fine Art
371 Grand Street, Lower East Side
Through May 28

Working in a field shared by photographers as diverse as Doug and Mike Starn and Wolfgang Tillmans, Josephine Pryde creates enigmatic and stylish photographs that are often blurry, overexposed and further altered by darkroom manipulations. They would be judged failures by conventional standards of photographic quality, but that just makes them more hip.

Ms. Pryde, who is British and in her late 30's, wants to do more than just stretch contemporary taste. An oblique, politically subversive conceptualism animates her work. In this small show, portraits with ghostly double-exposed elements and burrs of iron filings held to their surfaces by invisible magnets parody spirit photography. Other pictures allude to Modernist experimentation: the blue-tone photograph of something resembling a translucent stool sample could be a dark-room experiment by Man Ray or a spirit photographer's record of a blob of ectoplasm. In fact, a person at the gallery told me, it depicts a slimy material sold in toy stores.

Thus Modernist experimentalism collapses on the one hand into old-fashioned spiritualist fakery and on the other into consumerism. Photography's participation in bogus fantasies of transcendence is satirically revealed, and that may be read as a broader comment on the empty and delusive promises of capitalist modernity.

Ms. Pryde plays her cards close to the vest. Being elusive is part of an iconoclastic strategy of resisting and critiquing mainstream culture and society, which makes her work at once annoyingly coy and seductively intriguing.

KEN JOHNSON