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ART REVIEW

'Philip-Lorca diCorcia' at LACMA



LACMA

ON THE BOULEVARD: "Mike Mincetti; 24 years old; New York, New York; \$30." was taken in Hollywood at dusk.

The haunting, intense images capture real life in the big city.

By David Pagel, Special to The Times
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At a time when museums seem to be all about packing crowds into blockbuster exhibitions and expanding their facilities with spectacular buildings by star architects, it's refreshing to come across "Philip-Lorca diCorcia." This quiet little show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art efficiently surveys the New York photographer's heart-wrenching pictures of ordinary people doing their damndest to keep their dreams alive in circumstances so difficult that less seasoned folks -- or reality-toughened citizens -- might see them as desperate, even hopeless.

Tucked away in a modest ground-floor gallery off the corridor that links the recently opened Broad

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Contemporary Art Museum to the handsomely refurbished galleries of the Ahmanson Building, the sharply focused show (up until Sept. 14) introduces new viewers to diCorcia's unsentimental vision of life in the big city.

It also reacquaints old fans with the 54-year-old photographer's uncanny talent for making strangers (and their strangeness) intimate -- without transforming them into two-bit players in clichéd fantasies.

Organized by Charlotte Cotton, LACMA's curator of photography, the comfortably sized exhibition consists of 30 Chromogenic prints from four bodies of work that diCorcia made from 1990 to 2004, along with an installation of 1,000 Polaroids that he completed in 2007.

"Hustlers," his best-known series, is the most well-represented, with 14 large and small shots of mostly young men strutting their stuff along Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood. Made from 1990 to 1992 and funded with a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, diCorcia's breakout series features men posing for their portraits in motel rooms, parking lots and laundromats, outside fast-food restaurants, gas stations and boarded-up buildings, and simply sitting at bus stops or on street corners, usually at dusk.

The guys are fantastic for their individuality. Although many are clearly pretending to be someone they've seen in the movies, most can't be bothered with such silly fantasies and stand, matter-of-factly, for the camera. Not one elicits pity. Or begs for sympathy. Or for anything at all. A here-I-stand, this-is-it groundedness suffuses the strongest. It's an attractive quality.

DiCorcia has labeled each portrait with the man's name and age, the city he came to L.A. from and the amount of money he was paid for the picture (from \$20 to \$50). The bare-bones info speaks volumes, but it's no match for the riveting intensity and haunting complexity of the pictures.

Different dreams

It's obvious that these guys, who range in age from 18 to 38, did not come to Hollywood with the goal of being street prostitutes -- that their dream life in California didn't exactly pan out. Some appear to have grown accustomed, and pretty comfortable, with themselves -- or at least they are able to keep up appearances as well as their neighbors back home. Others look like strangers in their own skin, so vulnerable, scared and forlorn that the damage seems irreparable. And some are so green that they don't seem to have a clue about what's going on -- or any idea of what might come next.

To make "Hustlers," diCorcia selected a setting and set up his camera and lights. While an assistant guarded the equipment, he set out to find a sitter.

To make his next two series, "Streetwork" (1993-98) and "Heads" (2001-03), diCorcia set up his tripod along downtown sidewalks, hid his flash mechanism as best he could and waited, like a hunter, for the right passersby to come along.

Shot in L.A., London, Paris and Naples, Italy, the five pieces from "Streetwork" reveal diCorcia's passion for people-watching and his fascination with the interior lives of anonymous city dwellers. In his wide-ranging pictures -- of journeymen, businessmen, homeless men and retired men -- the proverbial man in the street takes on great specificity, uniqueness, individuality.

Stolen portraits

For "Heads," all shot in New York, diCorcia used a long-distance lens to zoom in on the faces of people whose portraits he stole. The six here -- "Head #1," "#7," "#11," "#13," "#23" and "#24" -- cover a wider range of the public, including an angelic girl, smiling to herself for reasons only she knows, and a uniformed security guard, sapped of his vitality and with only enough strength to convey the quiet consternation of putting up with a job that drains the life out of you.

Set against black backgrounds, the individuals seem to be illuminated by divine light. Yet their appeal is democratic, energized by pedestrian evenhandedness and Everyman accessibility. In both series, diCorcia's best images seem surreptitious, not like scripted scenes from movies but like Garry Winogrand photographs of the inimitable beauty of everyday happenstance.

Staged series

In contrast, diCorcia's fourth series, "Lucky 13" from 2004, is staged. The five largest images depict pole dancers Hannah, Asia, Tennille, Amber and Heema. Each of the scantily clad women appears high above a strip-club stage, suspended, often upside down, like a circus acrobat in midflight.

But diCorcia's portraits are not action shots. Their stillness, which begins with the women's impassive expressions and is amplified by the empty interiors of the clubs, is unsettling. It's made even stranger by the no-nonsense, just-doing-my-job integrity the women convey. All of the pictures' perversity resides in their compositions, which recall specimens, such as colorful butterflies, pushpinned within display cases for the study and delectation of collectors.

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The installation of 1,000 Polaroids, set on shallow metal shelves in an alcove, functions like a walk-in sketchbook. It gives visitors an idea of the everyday objects that strike diCorcia's fancy. They're remarkably ordinary -- clocks, plates, lamps, trees, lakes, train tracks, tourist sites and balloons -- and not nearly as gripping as his big pictures of ordinary folks whose body language tells tales filled with enough twists and turns to tie one's emotions in knots.