

Art exhibit allows untold stories to emerge through cropped and mangled vintage newsroom prints

By **Molly Glentzer** | December 19, 2016 | Updated: December 19, 2016 4:49pm



Photo: Molly Glentzer

IMAGE 1 OF 8

Design guru Murray Moss purposefully hung a collection of vintage news prints at Hiram Butler Gallery as "haphazardly" as they might be at someone's home.

Ethel Hoffman's family may have paid a pretty sum in 1939 for her debutante portrait by the Udel Brothers' Baltimore photo studio. But her quizzical expression looks priceless.

Murray Moss thinks he knows why: "It's the ... dress!" he said, looking at the print that's hanging at Hiram Butler Gallery.

Hoffman's voluminous tulle gown nearly dwarfs her as she poses stiffly on a formal settee in a room with other trappings of wealth - a fancy rug, a big silver vase, a painting that might depict a famous ancestor.

But Moss loves the image because it's been mangled a bit, and white-pencil crop marks separate Hoffman's upper body from everything else: This print came from the archives of the Baltimore Sun, where someone plucked just a one-column head shot from it.

Moss started collecting vintage newsroom prints with crop marks four years ago. "Weirdly, it's exceptionally timely at the moment," he said.

He loves them because they look "profound in the lie," allowing viewers to see what he thinks of as "the decision to deceive."

"When you look at these you go, whoa, the whole point of it was this, and they're not showing that," he said.

Moss has a legendary eye for details.

For 15 years, he and his partner, Franklin Getchell, ran the renowned New York design emporium Moss, which sold avant-garde designer home goods and gifts. After closing the store in late 2011, they opened a consulting business whose clients now include the gift shop at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

That led to the connection with Butler's gallery, where Moss is selling just a fraction of the prints he's collected from web-based companies that have acquired entire libraries of vintage, annotated prints from downsizing newspapers (including the Houston Chronicle) who have gone digital.

Moss paid about \$6 apiece for the prints, sorting through millions of images online to retrieve only "good" ones with mark-ups that add a layer of narrative. That kind of handling is a kind of "patina of servitude" that makes a print a unique artwork, he said.

"I'm an object guy. I think when things have come to a point when they're no longer functional, they can become something else, sometimes, that's rather beautiful."

Moss grew up around other kinds of photography, without too much of an interest in it.

His father designed dental X-ray equipment and often experimented on Moss and his sister in a basement laboratory.

"He patented and did incredible things - this rotating anode tube that goes around your mouth at the dentist's today - my father invented that," Moss said.

MORE INFORMATION

'Inadmissible Evidence: Annotated Press Photographs From the Collection of Murray Moss'

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Jan. 7

Where: Hiram Butler Gallery, 4520 Blossom

Info: Free; 713-863-7097, hirambutler.com

His sister, the late Jean Moss-Weintraub, had a great career as a commercial photographer. Wanting to honor her memory a few years ago, Moss started looking for her work online and stumbled upon newspaper archives containing interviews and pictures of her.

Medication for Parkinson's disease kept him awake much of the night, and he ended up surfing those sites compulsively - and building a unique collection.

"This started as a personal thing with my sister, and I didn't want to make a big thing of it," he said. "But then I got interested in it. ... These are one of a kind. And they don't do it anymore."

Cropping photographs is still a standard practice by many in journalism, but very few make prints anymore in this digital world.

Moss gravitated to prints from the Baltimore Sun because he felt they were aggressively handled. "I find it amazing, the chutzpah to do this, and fascinating. And powerful," he said.

The show is full of images whose subjects were "lifted" from their environments - a widow and her children sitting underneath a cheap tapestry of "The Last Supper." A uniformed nurse at a shooting range, pointing a pistol. The head of a rapt Arthur Rubinstein, floating like an orb above his body as he plays the piano.

Even first lady Jackie Kennedy gets half-wiped out of a portrait with President John F. Kennedy and young Caroline, left to gaze back at viewers now with one eye.

Other images are interrupted by big black dots - text "windows" for inset blocks of type. Or they might have some element highlighted with paint, or a drawn layer to suggest some action that wasn't captured: A dull image of a nondescript building where a suicide happened, for

example, with dotted lines leading from a high window to an "X" on the street.

"Sometimes it was about, how are you going to juicy it up?" Moss said.

He and gallery director Josh Pazda had some fun themselves with a sly exhibition design that aims to be slightly provocative.

The 30 prints are grouped by categories but not evenly spaced. (The curated, framed and documented prints are priced from \$2,000 to \$3,000.)

"Photographs are used domestically as souvenirs. This gallery is very precise; they know what they're doing," Moss said. "But not everybody measures. What happens if we ask you to ... walk in the shoes of the people who just eyeball it?"

He said he wasn't trying to cause trouble or lay blame. He just wants to demonstrate how a situation can have multiple truths.

A photographer decided what was true to him by framing his composition. Then an editor had other needs.

"They were frugal, and they mutilated these prints, depending on what they needed," Moss said.

"This truth had many decisions, agendas, that had to be accommodated. ... This is about looking. We are shaped, directed, guided by art to see things in a certain way. And we, as viewers, with our own baggage and experience, will augment that agenda.

"There is no one, absolute truth. ... We can look at the same evidence, and it's not evidence. It's not."



Molly Glentzer

Arts, Design & Culture
Writer / Editor,

Houston Chronicle
