Lee Godie, *Untitled*, date unknown, hand-colored gelatin silver print, ink, 4½ × 3⅝". From "PHOTO | BRUT: Collection Bruno Decharme & Compagnie."

Chez Decharme, artists amass photographic archives to sublimate shameful desires, "making their daily life an unreality or making their chimeras hyper-real," as historian Michel Thévoz notes in the exhibition's catalogue. Consider the *unheimlich* Balthusian portraits of the anatomically correct dolls of adolescents carved by Morton Bartlett, or the deliberately blurred, blotched, and misprocessed output of Miroslav Tichý, whose surviving snapshots of women in public, furtively recorded with instruments cobbled together from street junk, achieve a haunted erroneous pictorialism.

A broad contingent of these imagemakers work across mediums: collaging, sculpting, or marking photographs to develop more tactile relationships to representation. The now-blue-chip *brutists* Henry Darger, Charles Dellschau, and Adolf Wölfli all reconstituted mass-media detritus in their roiling fabulations, as did Steve Ashby, the Southern figurative assemblagist who, with plywood and scavenged magazine pages, devised witty effigies on love, racism, and grief. Those familiar names all gainsay *art brut*'s foundational clichés of cultural purity—as does the lesser-known Russian mystic Valentin Simankov, who makes intimate abrasive collages layered with newsprint, sheet music, and manipulated photographs. His alchemies remind us that so-called visionary artists react not only to the stirrings of an inner voice, but also to the state-backed visual regimes that subtend official history. One untitled piece by Simankov, dated between 1993 and 2015 and featuring a mottled exposure of a young girl, evokes a cosmonaut sailing through a radioactive cloud.

Needless to say, all of these artists refute the dratted insider/outsider binary, perhaps none more fabulously than Lee Godie, the soi-disant French Impressionist who, starting in the 1960s, transformed Chicago's public photo booths into sites of radiant reinvention. In pictures frequently embellished with acrylic, pencil, lipstick, or eyeliner, she captured herself as brazen, gender-bending personae: Parisian socialite, fading starlet, streetwise mogul, muse and maker. Widely considered Chicago's most collected artist, Godie, who died in 1994 and spent much of her life homeless, often sewed these self-portraits onto her offbeat paintings as certificates of authenticity, charging extra for the addition. Her devoted clientele could find Godie in her usual spot in front of the steps of the Art Institute of Chicago, where her art now resides in the permanent collection.

Formed in the reflection of a single acquisitional eye, Decharme's *photo brut* is inevitably defined by biases and blind spots, some more regrettable than others: Of some forty artists represented in the exhibition, Godie is one of only four women, who number twice the Black artists included. A question arises: How should something like "outsider photography" be framed in an age when digital images have transformed the very infrastructure of sociality? Ichiwo Sugino, whose celebrity masquerades with adhesive tape belong to Instagram, is among the show's handful of living artists who shares his work online. But the most prophetic artist here never considered himself an artist at all. A man known only as Frédéric, undergoing psychokinetic experiments in France during the summer of 1976, claimed to be able to reproduce images from his mind onto Polaroids. We see them here: spectral wefts and phosphene-like embers seared onto a black abyss. His "thoughtographies" affirm, if not the supernatural realm, the photograph as conduit of pure facticity, available to every and no meaning, an otherworld in itself.

—Zack Hatfield

Brassaï

MARLBOROUGH

Once one gets past Brassaï's sometimes sensationalizing accounts of his own art—that he "was eager to penetrate this other world, this fringe world, the secret, sinister world of mobsters, outcasts, toughs, pimps, whores, addicts, inverts"—one realizes that the photographer was making portraits of singular human beings with whom he empathically identified. His pictures are trenchant psychological studies of individuals who lived life as they wanted to (or, in many instances, *had* to). Brassaï felt at home in Paris's underground, a realm of the alien and the alienated, because he, too, was an outcast: a Hungarian-born foreigner who was too *other* to ever properly fit the role of the assimilated *Français*, even though he became a French citizen in 1949 and lived in France until his death in 1984. The thirty-nine Brassaï prints on view at Marlborough—many of which appeared in the artist's first exhibition at the gallery's New York space in 1976—showed us that the acclaimed Rive Gauche voyeur could also be, on occasion, more than a little tender.

Brassaï, like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who inspired the photographer, found his subjects in places of entertainment—cabarets, bars, dance halls—where they frequently *were* the entertainment. Yet Brassaï gained access to these sundry haunts and milieus because he was welcomed as a fellow traveler (or, perhaps more accurately, as a gawker who didn't judge). One wonders if Brassaï envied the "outsiders" he snapped for how comfortable they appeared to be in their own skins. Take the stylish lesbian lovers of *Au Monocle, un couple* (Fat Claude and her Girlfriend at Le Monocle), ca. 1932, who seem cozy and affectionate with one another, or the cheerful men—one of whom wears a frilly white frock and matching hat—dancing together in *Un couple au bal Magic-City*, (A Couple at the Magic City Ball), ca. 1931–33.

Brassaï, *Au Monocle, un couple* (Fat Claude and her Girlfriend at Le Monocle), ca. 1932, gelatin silver print, 13¾ × 10⅜".

Some of Brassaï's people are clearly from the underclass, while others ostensibly belong to the upper class (such as one "Monsieur B.," who's clad in a gold-brocade kimono and enjoying some opium); yet all are peculiarly classless by reason of their pursuit of *la vie jolie* in whatever form. Carnal desire further erodes these social boundaries, as we see in *Chez 'Suzy' la presentation* (At Suzy's, Introductions) ca. 1932–33, in which a suited slick-haired john sizes up a trio of hard-assed graces at a brothel. Among the most dignified portraits here were Brassai's pictures of the homeless. His 1934 portrait of one

top-hatted man, referred to as "the dean of Parisian vagabonds" in the work's title, looks positively aristocratic.

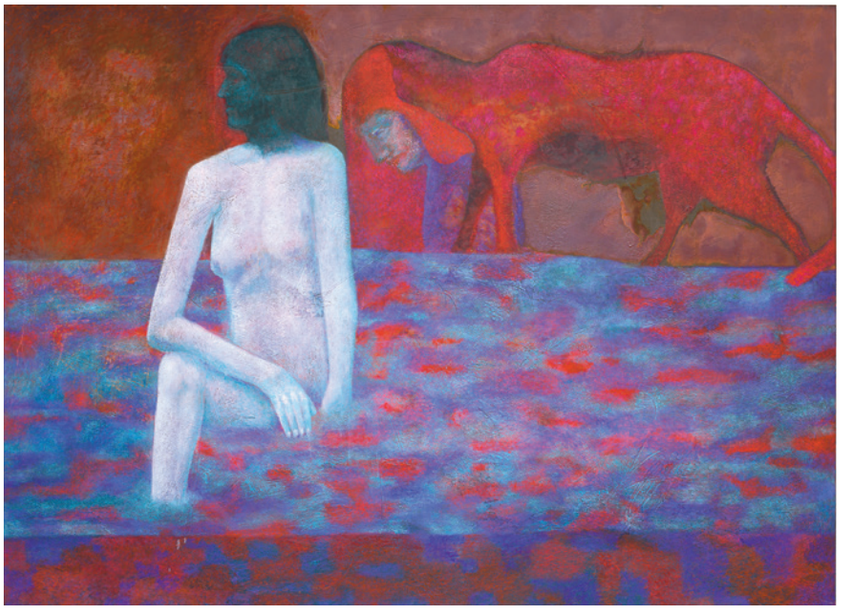
"There is a history of darkness in the making of images," novelist and photographer Wright Morris wrote, noting that "at Pech-Merle and Altamira, in the recesses of caves, the torchlit chapels of worship and magic, images of matchless power were painted on the walls and ceilings." Virtually all of Brassaï's photographs are dialectical studies in visibility and darkness—his camera was his guide through the sensuous, sin-filled night. Brassaï wanted his work to be recognized as art at a time when photography was still struggling for respect, which may explain his numerous pictures of avant-garde artists, such as Aristide Maillol, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. These men—self-made "originals"—are as decidedly individualistic as the drag queens, sex workers, and myriad bons vivants that appeared throughout this show. Brassaï worships them all in the torchlit chapel of his photographs, where they are transformed into magical presences, as though seen in a waking dream.

—Donald Kuspit

Alastair Mackinven

REENA SPAULINGS FINE ART

The haunted, dreamlike atmosphere of Alastair Mackinven's paintings hearkens back to the late nineteenth century—to the era of symbolism, aestheticism, and decadence. While many of the forms in his tableaux may be well-defined, one always has the suspicion that each picture's hazy and interfusing hues are acting independently of the obscure irresolvable dramas that seem to unfold in the work. His figurative scenarios, full of eerie doings in intangible and indeterminate spaces, are enigmatic: In one of the works (all are *Untitled*, 2020), the head of an unsmiling woman, pale as a marble statue under multicolored fluorescent lights—and bearing an expression as inscrutable as the *Mona Lisa*'s—is accompanied by a dog, perhaps a whippet, whose eye flashes a radioactive red. Elsewhere, another woman, nude, sits up in a pool of water that in the foreground falls off a hard perpendicular edge, as though flowing from a tabletop. Her head is shrouded in deep shadow, though her body is illuminated, and behind her skulks a sort of sphinx dog, its coat as scarlet as the reflections in the water. In another canvas, what might be a limbless statue of a male figure seems to stand watch over a table on which sits nothing other than an ordinary plastic cigarette lighter. In still another, a couple, bathed in pale-blue light, lie beneath a pattern of rhomboid forms. The man sleeps soundly under a golden blanket, while his partner, under her own whitish cover, looks restless. Her knee is bent and her eyes may be open—it's hard to tell.



Alastair Mackinven, ***Untitled*****, 2020,** oxidized iron powder and oil on canvas, 63 × 86".

Are there more certain stories behind this imagery, or is the otherworldly mood the main offering? The exhibition title, "Dlnrg [oeeey]," was hardly calculated to leave any clues. And the artist's statement? In this text, Mackinven denounces the miserable cultural insularity of England, his home country. The myth of the British eccentric, he says, leads only to a dead end, since, as the artist writes, "the lone fire of the eccentric burns out, leaving nothing but colorful anecdotes and relics too sodden with the ghost of their author" to be more than "an outward gestural signifying of singularity" as recompense for "postcolonial ennui." Mackinven thereby abrogated in advance any hope that one might locate his work within some extended heritage that might somehow unite, for instance, J. M. W. Turner's chromatic intensity with William Blake's mythographic imagination. As for past interpretations of Mackinven's work, he seems to have flummoxed the critics: In twenty-five years of artistic activity, discursive engagement has been practically nil—this magazine, for example, has run only a single review of a two-person show in which he was involved, along with a couple of other very brief mentions.

So viewers are on their own. We have to look at these paintings first of all as physical entities, not communicative devices. In fact, their sense of material obduracy—in contrast to their imagistic nebulousness—is noteworthy: As it turns out, Mackinven paints on canvases prepared with oxidized iron powder, which is what gives his surfaces their feeling of mineral density: a dry, deeply absorbed quality reminiscent of fresco. But in place of the immediacy of buon fresco, the paintings have a temporal thickness that mimics the material one: The eye slowly explores the artist's endlessly blending and separating hues, which one can imagine were arrived at only gradually. Yet the images trapped in these surfaces seem transitory, as though one could blow them away with a single strong breath, leaving the gorgeous colors floating there, as it were, naked. These chromatic polymorphous compounds are enormously satisfying, and one comes to wonder whether the paintings' impenetrable encounters are meant simply to redirect viewers to the nonrpresentational—to send them the long way around, but giving them so much to observe along the way.

—Barry Schwabsky

Jeanne Reynal

ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY

In 1958, Clement Greenberg penned a short essay that posited aesthetic parallels between Byzantine art and modernism. Despite their differences, he said, these movements were united by an emphatic pictorialism, their transcendent qualities tied up with a shared repudiation of illusionism. In this text, the critic cited the work of certain painters, such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, as examples. "This new kind of modernist picture," Greenberg wrote, "like the Byzantine gold and glass mosaic, comes forward to fill the space between itself and the spectator with its radiance."

Mention of Jeanne Reynal (1903–1983), a first-generation New York School artist who created modernist mosaic works using Byzantine techniques, might have fortified Greenberg's essay, supplying structural links in addition to aesthetic ones. Reynal's consummately