SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY
RACHEL UFFNER

A century or so ago, championed by Alfred Stieglitz and Camera Work, the Pictorialist photographers emulated the visual characteristics of painting, often through extensive darkroom manipulation, in a bid to establish photography as an art form. Today, although photography’s legitimacy is inarguable, Sara Greenberger Rafferty follows in this tradition, making her photographs resemble expressionist paintings. She prints a digital photograph of an image—usually appropriated from mainstream cultural sources, such as TV—using water-based inks, and then douses it with water, allowing the inks to bleed, blend, run and pool in arbitrary ways. She then rephotographs the result.

Rafferty’s recent exhibition—the Brooklyn-based artist’s second at Rachel Uffner—was titled “Remote.” Accordingly, little detail of the facial expressions or gestures of her inscrutable subjects remains in these highly mediated photos (all works 2011). Leslie (20 inches square) suggests a Rembrandt-like half-length portrait washed in golden light and set within a dark, indistinct space. Sam (25 by 20 inches) gives us a bit more to go on. The subject is female; she faces the camera; she appears to be illuminated by candlelight. Although their faces are blurred beyond immediate recognition, we discern in Kim and in Allie the extremely physical comedians Andy Kaufman and Gilda Radner, despite the pictures’ deliberately misleading titles. Their poses are unmistakable. The images’ derivation from TV suggests one meaning for “remote”—namely, the appliance used for channel-surfing.

The eccentric installation of the exhibition made the viewer aware of his or her bodily relation to the work—often anything but remote, offering an ironic spin on the term. Twelve of the photos were hung in a rough grid on a black-painted, freestanding partition wall just inside the entrance, an arresting arrangement that blocked sightlines into the rest of the gallery. And, in a narrow space near the gallery office, the viewer was unable to stand at a comfortable distance from four larger works. Described as “direct substrate prints on plastic,” each features a distorted photo of a long-haired brunette in gym clothes. In the 68 1/2-by-47 1/4-inch Fig (Jump), the nearly life-size figure’s legs and feet are legible, but the torso, head and arms are obscured by an unruly blotch of indigo. Like its companion pieces, the photo was printed on clear plastic film and displayed unframed. The enforced proximity to these images delayed any visual resolution and induced a funny kind of anxiety.

Frame, another print on plastic, which the viewer likely saw last, was the only work in the show without at least an oblique reference to the human figure. Framed by a relatively dense and splotchy margin, a limestone-block pattern of wall emerges, listing to the left. In the center is a vertical pink shape, an orifice or scar, fringed with purple rivulets. Of all the manipulations and alterations in this show, this reeling, wounded wall most pungently evoked bodily damage.

—Stephen Maine